Ivanka's
Forget-Me-Nots

I want to tell you everything I remember from my earliest years, more than sixty-seven years ago.

I'm writing this so that you will know how your forebears lived, worked, and died.

Ivanka Hren

Ivanka's Forget-Me-Nots

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Preface

Ivanka's Forget-Me-Nots is a deeply personal story of Ivanka Hren, my grandmother, born in 1901 in Slovenia. In a series of secret, retrospective writings, Ivanka shares her extraordinary life story. Her narrative weaves together the experiences of being the blacksmith's daughter, a farmer's wife, a mother of six, a war widow and an extraordinary creative soul navigating the stormy periods of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, First and Second World Wars and Socialism that followed.

In her pages, Ivanka speaks of joy, love, music, customs, loss, and survival - universal themes that resonate across generations. These writings offer us a glimpse into the soul of Slovenia, capturing the essence of its identity. They are more than personal reflections; they are a testament to a shared national memory.

Through Ivanka's eyes, we are reminded of where we come from, who we are, and learn about the songs that are echoing within us. Her story becomes not just a reflection of her own experiences but a source of inspiration - a courageous woman who endured immense joy and pain, yet survived and thrived. Ivanka's words invite us to see her not only as a witness to history but as a teacher, a friend, and a guide for future generations. In a larger sense, her role as a guardian of Slovenia's roots makes her story an indispensable part of the nation's collective consciousness. As her granddaughters, we continue to carry her legacy into a world that has changed, yet still bears the imprint of the past.

Rebeka Hren Dragolič

Growing up

I was given the name of my dear mother, Ivana.

I was a frail child, while my younger sister Angela was plump and rosy. You could count my ribs, and some even thought I would not survive.

With my sister Angela on the right.

Our Kitchen in Dragomer

All the furniture in our kitchen was low - a small cupboard and a squat table. When Mother opened the cupboard, a delicious smell drifted out, tickling my nose. I can't say exactly what was in there, but the memory of that scent is still beautiful to me.

The ceiling and walls were black and shiny with soot. In winter, high above, hung sausages, hams, bacon, stuffed pig's stomachs and other treats, strung on soot-darkened poles. We didn't have modern cookers in those days - we cooked in the great brick-built oven.

In front of the oven there was a raised hearth. Sometimes lard or browned flour sizzled there, and at times we lit a fire simply to smoke the meat hanging above. Mother would seat my sister and me there so we could watch, wide-eyed, as lunch cooked inside. Pots stood in the oven, and on their lids, turnips baked for us. We called these baked turnips *smunke*, and they were delicious.

On the other side of the wall, in the main room, the back of the oven was tiled - the warmth radiated for hours, making it the cosiest place in the house. In winter people would sit there, stretch out, and even sleep on it.

The hens slept under the kitchen stairs at night, presided over by the rooster. In one corner stood the pig's cauldron. If we left the kitchen in the evening with a kerosene lamp and returned later, the steam from the cauldron would be alive with cockroaches. They crawled everywhere, muttering their strange "mew, mew, mew". Mother would scrape them off the walls into a basin of water, where they sank. In the morning the hens enjoyed a fine breakfast. By day, there wasn't a single cockroach in sight - they hid in cracks and corners.

There was a small opening in the wall. If my sister and I were in the bedroom, bouncing on the bed, we would take turns poking our heads through to watch Mother in the kitchen. She was a wonderful cook; even the simplest dishes tasted splendid. Instead of soup, we had sauerkraut every day, ladled from an earthenware bowl. No one ever complained or refused to eat.

For supper we always had potatoes in their skins and a cup of milky "coffee" - not real coffee, but the roasted chicory or barley malt drink everyone had in those days. I ate the potatoes unpeeled because I had been told it would make me brave.

THE COWARD

Brave I was not. In the evenings, with the kerosene lamp lit, I dared not glance towards the first window. The shutters were closed, but the glass was poorly made and distorted. Faces would appear in it - stretched, twisted, grimacing at me. When I moved, the faces moved too. I was certain they were devils peering in. I never looked closely; I usually covered my face with my hands.

I was also afraid of the neighbour's cat, who crept in at night through the shutters to drink our milk and lick off the cream. Once, he found himself in front of the lit oven, staring into the flames. The apprentices came in and chased him with the fire tongs. Terrified, he leapt up into the chimney - which must have been hot indeed - and yowled as they poked at him. I sat huddled on the oven, shrinking with fear.

In the end, the cat tumbled down, black with soot (he had been white before), and darted out through the half-open door.

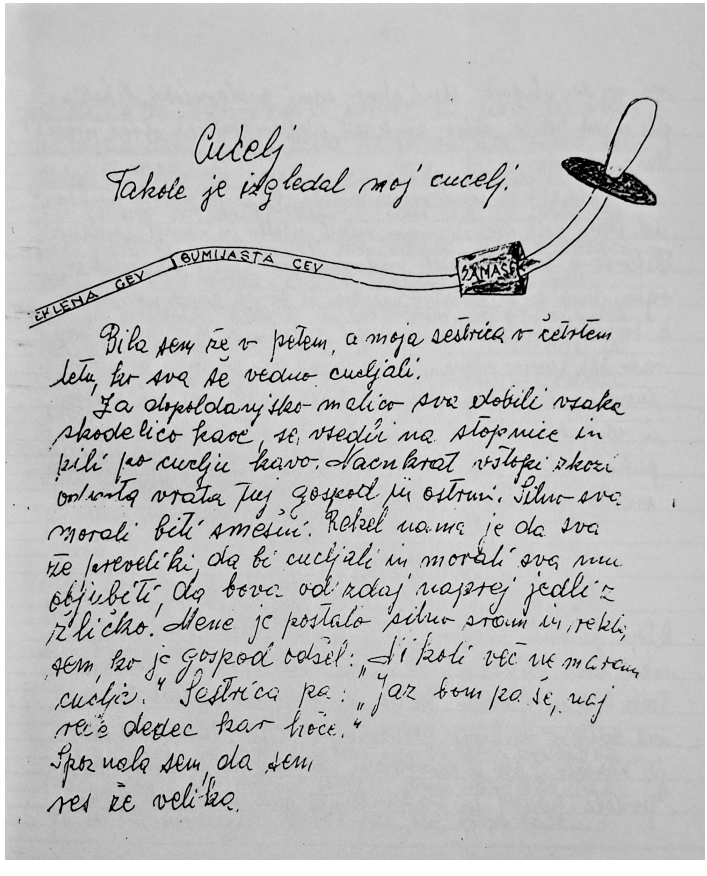
Cucelj[1]

I was already in the fifth year of school, and my little sister Angela was in fourth, yet we still drank from a baby's bottle teat. For our mid-morning snack, each of us was given a cup of milky "coffee" and we would sit together on the steps, sipping it through our teats.

One day, a stranger walked in through the open door and stopped in his tracks. We must have looked an odd sight. He told us we were far too old to be drinking from a teat and made us promise that from now on we would use a spoon like proper big girls. I felt terribly embarrassed, and when he had gone, I declared, "I'll never want a teat again!" My sister, however, was defiant: "Well, I will! I don't care what that man says."

It was at that moment I realised - I really was growing up.

1 The Baby's Bottle Teat



Ivanka's hand writing and a drawing of her "cucelj" consisting of a glass tube attached to a thin rubber hose that went trough a cork bottle stopper with bottle teat at the end.

The Mishap

One day, Mother had kneaded dough for bread. On the bench by the stove stood the *meterga* - the large wooden trough in which bread dough was mixed. Angela and I were lying on our stomachs on top of the warm tiled stove-bed in the adjoining room, watching her work.

Mother went off into the kitchen to prepare lunch, and that was when it happened. There was a loud crash - Angela had leaned too far forward and tumbled headfirst into the *meterga*. The trough fell to the floor, the lid sprang off, and the risen dough spilled out in a great heap.

Mother came running, grabbed Angela, and shut her in the little room. She howled at the top of her lungs. Mother fetched a bucket, cut away a good portion of the dough, shoved the rest back into the trough, and finally scrubbed the floor clean. She sternly told me I was not to breathe a word about it. Oh, my first delicious secret! My tongue itched to tell someone. Angela was still sobbing in the little room, and now it was her turn to face the consequences. Her knitted red dress... poor Mother - how she managed to wash dough out of that I will never know.

When Father and the apprentices came in for lunch, he asked, "Have you been scrubbing the floor?" Mother quickly slipped into the kitchen without answering, and the incident was quietly forgotten.

ANOTHER ACCIDENT

We children spent much of our time playing on top of the stove-bed. We had an old basket with a round bottom. Being the smallest, I could squeeze myself inside it. It had a large handle, and I would hold onto it and rock back and forth on the stove-bed, calling, "Look at me! Look at me!"

But once I leaned too far towards the edge and toppled down onto the bench, where someone had left a pot of dirty washing water. Over it went - all over me. Wedged tight in the basket, I couldn't get out, and since I had only just managed to squeeze myself in, I was stuck. Everyone in the room laughed so hard that I couldn't help laughing too, instead of crying.

BEMCI - THE BAGPIPERS

"Mama, when will the bagpipers come?" we children would ask eagerly. Their wonderful music stayed in our ears - we could have listened to them forever. They had strange instruments: a whole sheepskin, complete with legs, stretched smooth, with a mouthpiece at the neck. From this they coaxed such soft, melting melodies that it touched your heart. These were bagpipes.

The men were tall and strong, and spoke a foreign language - I think they were Czechs. My father was a blacksmith, so all kinds of travellers came to our house. Outside, stout wooden posts stood ready for visitors to tether their animals. We children would watch through the window - a donkey with enormous ears, or, on one occasion, a double-humped camel. We teased the camel, sticking out our

tongues, but it looked at us so gently with its patient eyes. Heaven knows how far it had travelled before it came to Dragomer.

Most of all, we looked forward to the visits of "Završkar's" godfather, who came to have his horses shod. He was a wealthy farmer and one of the kindest men I've ever known. He always had something in his pocket for us children - oranges, sweets, sometimes just a lump of sugar. Never once did he come empty-handed. He was godfather to all the children.

The Gypsies

Gypsies once came to our village. They brought with them a bear and some monkeys. Leading the way was an older Gypsy woman carrying a small, neat tambourine. The tambourine was a little drum, with skin stretched tight on one side and open on the other. When the singing and dancing were over, the woman would turn it over and collect coins inside it.

The bear danced for us. He looked at us sadly, turned slowly round, and swayed clumsily from side to side on his heavy paws. The monkeys were livelier. They danced neatly in time to the beat of the tambourine, as the woman sang, and every so often they leapt over a stick.

The Gypsies wore their special dress. The women had very wide gathered skirts, with bright red or pink scarves tied at the front and back. Their blouses were white and puffed, and their long, black hair hung loose, decorated with colourful ribbons. From the ribbons hung silver and gold coins. Their faces shone, for they smeared them with bacon fat, which they were always asking for. Their skin was dark, their lips red, and all of them were barefoot.

The men were tall and rough-looking. They wore broad-brimmed hats, waistcoats, and red scarves tied round their necks. Whenever the Gypsies were in the village, our parents were anxious, for they often stole chickens, calves, or even a pig.

Once, at a farmer's place, an old sow had fallen ill and been buried. The Gypsies somehow heard of it. They asked the farmer to show them where he had buried the sow, even though it had been in the ground a week. They dug it up and roasted and fried it with great relish.

There was an Inn near our house where the Gypsies stopped. They had two bears tied under their cart, while they themselves went inside. My older sister came by with a stick in her hand and struck one of the bears. He leapt up, growling fiercely. The Gypsies rushed out, shouting and waving their arms. My sister barely escaped with her heels intact. The Gypsies scolded and threatened, and our parents were furious with her as well.

THE GREATEST JOY

Our greatest joy came on Sundays, when our parents went to early Mass. They were away for three whole hours. So that we children were not left alone, the apprentices from the upstairs room were called down to keep watch over us.

On the warm tiled stove-bench, the journeyman would play the accordion, filling the room with lively tunes. They sang along too, and the lads were full of jokes and tricks. They would lift us high in the air on their strong arms, which my sister and I especially loved.

All too soon, those three hours were gone and our parents returned - and with them the fun was over.

After breakfast, Father washed us, since we were still too small to do it properly ourselves. With his tough, calloused blacksmith's hands, he scrubbed firmly at our dirty ears and necks. While he washed me, I would play with the little silver horse and chain that dangled from his waistcoat.

I respected my father deeply, and he loved us just as much. Never once did I hear a harsh word or a curse from him, even when he was angry.

How They Cut My Sister's Hair

My older sister had beautiful, long, thick hair. Every morning it was a trial when Mother combed it. She couldn't manage it herself, and there were always tears and cries before two fine, plaited braids were made.

One fine day, however, a strange woman came to the house. She went from door to door buying hair. When she saw Tončka's splendid locks, she used all the smooth words her cunning tongue could manage. Mother rather liked the idea. She was tired of the endless combing and crying.

They sat my sister firmly on a chair, and the woman combed her hair all around. Then she gathered a thick fistful in her hand and cut it close to the scalp. She must already have reckoned how much money she could make from it, for she was in very good spirits. She combed the remaining hair, tied it up neatly, and as a 'reward' plaited in a bright red ribbon.

My poor sister wept bitterly, but it was no use. The woman counted out a few coins and left with her prize.

In those days, women didn't wear underclothes. They had long skirts and were not so delicate about such things. My eldest sister Tončka was already attending school, but it was almost an hour's walk away. Mother took pity on her, for in winter the cold was bitter, and so she bought her a pair of warm underpants. But when Tončka saw them, instead of being glad, she burst into tears:

"I don't like these! I won't, I won't wear them!"

She tried them on only under protest. In the end, though, she slowly resigned herself to her fate.

The Parasol

We were preparing for the celebration. On the Sunday of St Lawrence's Day, there was the customary *žegnanje* (parish feast) in Dragomer. For this occasion, my mother had baked a potica[2] and slaughtered a chicken. Our lodgers had guests visiting from Ljubljana, among them a nine-year-old girl called Malči. We all went off to Mass together.

On the hill the bells rang out and the mortars boomed. From near and far people hurried up the slope towards the church. I was terribly afraid of the cannon fire. What did those mortars look like? To my childish eyes they seemed like great black reels, as if a huge spool of thread had been set upright. In the centre of the reel was a hole. Into it the lads and men poured gunpowder and rammed it down with a stick. Then someone would shout, "Fire!" Everyone scattered, and a deafening bang followed. This shooting was part of the parade for our feast day.

2 A Slovenian walnut cake, usually baked for special occasions

During Mass I saw little but the backs of grown-ups towering above me. Afterwards, we hurried back down the hill. The sun blazed down fiercely. Malči opened her parasol. It was all pink and enchanting. She handed it to me. I held it upright like a little umbrella, but she instructed me: I had to tilt it towards the sun. If the sun was behind me, I should rest it on my shoulder; if in front, I must angle it forward.

I enjoyed myself so much, as though no advice in the world could be more precious than that parasol. From then on, all I desired was a parasol of my own.

Angela and I talked about what each of us wished for. She longed for a piano - to sit at it, to play, to strike the keys until the most beautiful melodies flowed out from it. But I wanted only a parasol. If I had one, I felt I would have everything.

In the end, neither of us had our wish: no piano, no parasol. My sister later struck the keys of a typewriter instead, while I became a farmer's wife, baking under the hot sun without the luxury of such fripperies as a parasol.

The Soldiers

Let me describe what the soldiers were like in those days. Every single one of them, from the first to the last, wore bright red trousers. The infantrymen had grey tunics. As for riding in vehicles - no one had even dreamt of such a thing. There were no lorries yet. The soldiers marched for miles upon miles, keeping step to the beat of a drum or the strains of a brass band.

The dragoons had horses. They wore red trousers, black tunics, and red caps. But the most splendid of all were the hussars. They too

were mounted, dressed in red trousers and fine blue tunics, fastened at the front with ornate black braiding all the way up to the neck. The hussars wore black shakos with a plume in front. These were the elite soldiers.

Once, on a long march, the infantry halted right by our home. Along the Imperial Road (today's Trieste Road) they sat down on either side, exhausted after the long march. Some took off their boots and bound the blisters on their feet. Our smithy too was full of them, resting wherever they could.

They spoke mostly German - because at that time we were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They had money, and even I, loitering about among them, managed to pick up a few coins. They were clean, disciplined men. We children were always delighted whenever the soldiers came marching our way.

The Left-Hander

I was very left-handed. With my left hand I cut the boiled potatoes we ate for supper, with my left hand I made the sign of the cross, I ate with my left hand, and I drew with it too. It made no difference when people rapped me on the knuckles - only when I went to school did I begin to learn to use my right hand as well.

When my sister Angela and I were given a slice of bread for breakfast, Angela would gobble hers down quickly, while I would creep into some corner, take one bite, then roll it into a lump in my mouth and suck it and suck it for ages, until someone caught me and told on me. With my right hand I would hold on to the button at the back of my dress. This happened every day until, in the end, the button came off. Mother sewed it on again firmly, and I went on with my

practice. Of course, someone always told on me, and then I got my hand smacked.

For the winter, Mother sewed us two new little dresses. This time she made them fasten at the front on purpose, but even that didn't help me break my habits. Instead, I gripped the smooth cloth at the middle of my back and fiddled with it so much that it wore thin and finally tore. Mother had to sew a patch onto the back of my dress.

We children were always drawing. My mother herself would sometimes sketch heaven for us, and my father too had quite a talent - he once drew me a little mouse, exactly as it looked in real life. We had a large book called *Stories from the Holy Scriptures*. Around the printed text were wide blank margins, and there we drew patterns for fabrics. All sorts of designs sprang from our imaginations. We would then 'trade' them, going from one to another, buying and selling cloth, praising and recommending our patterns.

We drew other things too, but the cloth was always the most fascinating. In those days, cloth for household use was often sold door to door. A woman from a town called Škofja Loka - we called her simply the "Ločanka" - came round with a cart full of fabric. Prices were bargained down to half in the end, and then the cloth was bought.

Once, my mother purchased some cloth for lining a skirt. It was chequered - red, blue, and white - and to our childish eyes it was dazzling. When my sister and I were alone, we would pull it from the drawer, admire it, and sniff it. It smelled of sweets. One day, when I was alone in the room, I pulled it out again, inhaled its fragrance, and finally began to lick it. To my amazement, it tasted sweet. More than once after that, whenever I found myself alone - otherwise they would have laughed at me - I went back to lick the cloth, until at last it was sent off to the seamstress.

The Little Doll

Once, my doll "died". I laid her out on the stove-bench as if on a bier. She had a little coffin made of tin. Her face was quite broken. From empty cotton reels I made candlesticks, and I decorated everything with holy pictures. Even the neighbour's children came to sprinkle her with holy water and attend the funeral.

Outside, beneath the spreading walnut tree, we dug a small grave. The funeral procession was solemn: one by one we came down from the stove, through the passage and across the threshold, weeping. I even managed to squeeze out a few real tears. Father watched us from outside his workshop, quietly amused at the sight.

We buried my doll and decorated the grave with flowers picked from the meadow.

Later, I asked Mother what happens to a person when they die and are buried. She said, "The worms eat them." Oh, how dreadful, how terrifying! I couldn't understand it. She added, "They'll eat me, and you as well."

So, I resolved in secret to dig up the grave of my poor little doll. Two weeks later I did so. When I opened it, horror of horrors - she was already falling apart and mouldering. I quickly covered her over again. But I hadn't seen any worms on her.

In the Field

Near our home we had fields and a few meadows. The Vrhnika train passed right through our plot. Whenever it went by, we always waved in greeting. There too, Angela and I made our little gardens on the molehills. Each of us had her own clay pot: mine was green and larger, hers brown. One day our father came running past and accidentally stepped on my pot. Oh, how I cried! He promised me a new one.

Beside the field ran a clear little brook, almost completely hidden by alders. There we quenched our thirst and washed ourselves.

In autumn, when we dug up the potatoes, the work had just been finished when a storm threatened. It soon began to thunder and flash terribly. Our elder sister Tončka was carrying forkfuls of potatoes and the piling them up. Heavy drops of rain were starting to fall. I clung to my sister's skirt to stay under her "roof". On the ridge lay a hoe. Tončka noticed it and stepped over, but I did not. I knelt straight down onto the sharp blade, which cut me right to the bone.

They say I fell unconscious at once, and that half a shoe full of blood was spilled. Someone ran home for the handcart, and they wheeled me back to the house. I don't know how long I lay unconscious in bed afterwards.

At last, I opened my eyes. I saw two men sitting at the table, with Father pouring them brandy. When he noticed me, he rushed to the bed and asked if I was in great pain. I said no. He gave me a sip of brandy, saying it would ease the hurt. In those days wounds were not stitched.

The nearest doctor was Dr. Marolt in Vrhnika - two hours away – or in Ljubljana, even further.

My sister Tončka often suffered badly with toothache. The pain drove her almost out of her mind. She saw mice everywhere - wher-

ever she struck at them, they jumped to another corner of her pillow. Father once brought home a medicinal camphor chalk from Vrhnika.

We children marvelled at the little boxes - large, smaller, and smaller still - and inside, wrapped in gauze, a white round stick of chalk. Mother rubbed a cloth with it and tied it to the aching place. It helped. The camphor was then carefully wrapped up again and put back into its three boxes. By the next day, though, it was already much reduced. No wonder, as the saying goes: "It vanished, like camphor!"

Bad Neighbours

Everything else was fine - our home was decent, even handsome. The farmers of Dragomer were glad to have a good blacksmith in the village. There was also a butcher and trader called Fogel. He was a real cheat, enriching himself at the expense of poor folk.

But our neighbours were the true trouble. I remember sitting on the balcony, watching Father repairing the fence between their land and ours. On their side lay a meadow, which they hardly mowed at all, as their animals trampled it. On our side was the open, wet manure heap. The neighbour's wife came up and shouted, *"You're standing on our side!"* She grabbed him by the legs and shoved him so that Father barely saved himself from falling. His hammer flew into the muck. The neighbour woman had a sharp tongue, while her husband knew better than to answer back.

It rained for a whole week. Then the neighbours came with a proposal that we dig a trench across in front of our house. Their house lay much lower than ours, so it was obvious the rainwater would naturally run downhill. Father refused: there would be no ditch in front of our home and smithy, he said - it made no sense. Still, the neigh-

bours came and began to dig anyway. They worked quickly, for they were a fiery lot. Father went on calmly hammering in the forge, not protesting at all. We children stood back and watched them digging. When they had finished and gone, Father and his apprentices quietly filled the trench back in.

Our two houses had once belonged to a single landowner. Ours was sound: fairly large windows with lattices and shutters, a fine doorway with stone jambs and a stone threshold, and behind, a small balcony, woodshed, and garden. Theirs, much lower down, was very old. Its windows were like loopholes, the doorway rounded. Inside there wasn't even a floor, just earth. Here and there were little hollows in the dirt, where the children relieved themselves. When heavy rain came, water flowed straight through the shut doors, so they could step out of bed straight into it. A lively brook ran past the house. They had eight children. Since our parents didn't get along with theirs, we weren't supposed to play together - though sometimes we managed it, nonetheless.

We also kept a small cowshed with a cow called Breza. Once Mother milked her and found the milk bloody. Fogel bought her for a few coins.

On fine sunny Sundays, Father would sit beneath the great walnut tree in front of the house, reading the newspaper, while we skipped about him, trying to win his attention.

Our house stood on the main road, which we called the Trieste Road. Only horse-drawn carts passed along it then, or now and then a motorcar. The motors were huge and clumsy, rattling and honking so loudly that everything – people and animals – fled out of the way. Already the first automobiles were appearing, though very rarely. When such a vehicle clattered past, blaring its Klaxon horn, we

rushed to the roadside to watch it as though it were a marvel: a carriage without horses!

From our place you could see far, far off towards Log. On the evenings before the feast of St Nicholas, the friend and benefactor of children, we gazed into the distance towards Log, even when it was already dark outside. My sister Tončka said that St Nicholas was coming in golden sleighs, listening to hear whether the children had been good, so he would know what to bring them. We watched so long that we heard the sleighbells jingling close by. The sleighs swept past our house; in the darkness we saw only the little lights and heard the bells.

At last, the longed-for evening came. My sister and I set out our baskets on the table, while Tončka put out a plate. The next morning the whole house smelled of St. Nicholas. In the baskets were treasures: two apples, each with a coin stuck in it - either a *groš* (five kreuzer) or a *zeksar* (ten kreuzer). There was a moneybox, a pretty painted toy drum into which we put our savings, dried pears, apple slices, plums, figs, and a few carob pods. Best of all, there was a St Nicholas figure made of gingerbread, painted bright red. Once, there was even a doll.

From our lodgers, with whom we got on very well, we also received some St Nicholas treats, among them a little hand-organ - painted in bright colours, strung with three wires that tinkled when plucked.

When our lodger, Aunty Lipar, had her name-day, I was taught to go and wish her well. Once I managed to say it properly, she lifted me on to her lap and asked me to sing her a song. I loved to sing. For my effort I was given a coin, and I ran home gleefully with my prize.

The Move

Father heard that building plots were being sold in Vrhnika. The Raiffeisen Savings Bank had bought a large tract of land, divided it into plots, and was selling them off for people to build houses. Because of the bad neighbours, Father longed to move elsewhere. He went to Vrhnika and bought a fine plot at a fair price. As they had no money for the new build, they had to take on debt. In the spring they began to build the house.

For the whole of *Nova vas* - "New Village," as the settlement was called - there was only one master builder, Petkovšek. He drew up a single plan for all the houses, so they were all alike. Ours had to include a smithy, so it was built with an extra wing and was somewhat larger.

The farmers of Dragomer were furious when they learned we were moving to Vrhnika. Now they would lose their blacksmith, and the nearest one was in Brezovica, which was far away. When the house was finished, we had to prepare for the move. Though the farmers were angry we were leaving, they still promised to move us - and even free of charge.

A few days earlier, three wagons had been loaded with the blacksmith's equipment. They were heavy things: anvils, the iron-drilling machine, a very heavy machine for bending rails, the bellows, and much besides. As for me - I was terrified of the bellows. They were made of leather and stood in a dark corner of the loft. The one in use rose and fell, hissing and whistling - it was dreadful. Mother once sat me on it, since it looked like a huge, closed umbrella. I was so frightened she had to lift me off at once.

Then we loaded two more wagons - this time with our furniture and other household goods. Early in the morning Mother prepared a

My sisters Tončka, Minka and Angela in front of our new house in Vrhnika.

hearty breakfast for the drivers, with sausages and wine. We children had to make do with bread and coffee. Before leaving, we went to say farewell at the nearby shop run by Rus's mother. She gave each of us a large bag of sweets to suck all the way to Vrhnika.

We put our old house up for sale, but not to the neighbour who had caused us so much unpleasantness. Instead Fogel bought it - and promptly sold it on to that very neighbour!

And so, we set off for Vrhnika, towards a better life in our new home. When we arrived, the walls were still being whitewashed, the main door had yet to be fitted, and even the toilet was unfinished. We asked the doctor if moving in would be safe for our health. He advised against it - at least for another month. Some kind neighbours lent us a room nearby where we could sleep until everything was ready.

Slowly, all was put in order. Father himself built a room in the attic for the apprentices. The workshop was fine and large enough, with wide sliding doors. We also built a woodshed, with a special store for the blacksmith's fuel - charcoal and coke.

There was never any shortage of work. It was the year 1908. That autumn I began school, already seven years old. My sister Tončka started to learn the seamstress's trade. She loved her lessons and longed to dress well. But since we were burdened with a debt of 2,500 crowns, we could barely scrape together the money just for the interest.

Father worked and worked, but he never sent out his bills until New Year. Then the whole year's work was added up. The iron had to be paid for at the shop. The tight-fisted farmers marvelled at the large bill for the whole year - but such was the custom among craftsmen. Through the year, however, we lived hand to mouth.

The Way to School

In those days, in 1909, children went to school both in the morning and in the afternoon. Thursdays we had free, but that too came with homework. The farming children, however, had to work all day on Thursdays, and sometimes they even came to school without having done their tasks. At such times I was glad I was not a farmer's child.

We walked to school barefoot, except in autumn and winter, when we wore shoes. In my first year I had a new pair of shoes made of calfskin, which was dull and greasy rather than shiny. In the second year they were altered - with new toes and new soles. In the third year I wore them only in dry weather, for they already let in water, and I wanted to make them last as long as possible. We all wore black

stockings at first. When the oak tree had put out its leaves, we were allowed to go barefoot. On Sundays in summer, when we went to Mass, I wore only the shoes - without those hot stockings.

In 1911 I went to my First Holy Communion. The catechist instructed us to bring either a school prayer book or the *Eternal Prayer*. In my foolish little head I thought I can't pester my parents again to buy me another prayer book. At home we had a large, thick volume of *Eternal Prayer*. So, I decided I would simply take this with me to Communion. And so, I lugged that heavy tome along, while the other children carried their little prayer books.

The catechist told us which page to find and began the prayers. I leafed in vain, unable to find the place, and so I prayed nothing. After Communion we were given large holy pictures, and then we went home.

That year was also Confirmation. Angela and I were the confirmands. Mother sewed us underskirts with little lace trimmings. Tončka prepared for us dresses of cream *diolen* - a fine fabric, the like of which we had never worn. The dresses were made according to the latest fashion.

For our Confirmation they bought us our very first proper shoes - made of shiny leather. Until then, only Father had shoes of box-leather - true luxury. My first *šolenčki*, as we called them then, had two straps, while Angela's fastened with buttons. We admired them - both of us had truly fine shoes.

Mother had much work to do for our Confirmation feast. She wanted to honour and treat our sponsors well. They were workers in the tobacco factory and travelled daily to Ljubljana. They earned good wages and were accustomed to finer fare. For that great day we had a new tablecloth, new cutlery, and new plates. For the first time I saw what dessert knives looked like.

After the church service we went to have our photograph taken, then we had a festive dinner. After the meal came the gifts. Each of us received a large box of sweet treats beyond anything we had ever dreamed of. There was even a piece of cake - called *Day and Night*. Half of it was yellow, half brown. In neat little handbags of red velvet were two brand-new Austrian thalers.

That day was truly a beautiful one.

A Year of Events

That year, 1911, truly was - a year of events.

One night my sister Angela and I, who slept together, could not fall asleep. We kept listening to the neighbour's cat yowling at the top of its voice on their doorstep. Only towards dawn did we doze off a little - but by then it was time to get up and go to school. We had our breakfast, and then a neighbour woman from our village plaited our hair. As she braided mine, she whispered to me: *"You're going to get a new baby sister..."*

We were delighted and surprised, because at home nothing had ever been said about Mother expecting a baby. When we came back from school, we would see her!

I was so distracted that I could hardly follow the lessons that day.

At home, the bedroom was in complete darkness. Mother lay on the bed. We saw our new little sister. She was tightly swaddled across arms and legs, bound close with bandages, and on her tiny head she wore a neat little cap. In the gloom we saw her only faintly.

The woman next door was also cooking. She made the most delicious *štruklji* (rolled dumplings) we had ever eaten. Father could not praise them enough. For Mother, who always had to count every

expense - for we were constantly in financial straits - such help was truly welcome.

Winter drew near - yet this time it was a winter without snow. Only about two centimetres fell, and then it was all over for that year.

In the morning, as I went to the dairy for milk, I walked with our neighbour's grandmother. She said: *"Where could it be written down, that we have winter but no snow?"* I took her words literally. On the way home I kept repeating to myself: *"Where could it be written down?"*

I found a piece of good charcoal, leaned a ladder against one of the brick posts in the woodshed, and on the highest brick I wrote with the charcoal:

"In the year 1911 it was a very mild winter - that was the year of my Confirmation."

I wrote the same on all four posts of our shed. Perhaps it is still written there - or perhaps the teeth of time have erased even my important record.

The National Holiday

Whenever it was the name day or birthday of our most illustrious Emperor, Franz Joseph I, it was declared a national holiday.

On that day the whole elite of Vrhnika gathered together. We children from all six classes of the elementary school walked in pairs along the main road to Holy Mass. The entire municipal council attended, with the mayor at its head. They wore tall hats - top hats - and tailcoats.

Behind them marched the craftsmen with their banner, and the fire brigade with their shining helmets.

At the end we all stood and sang the national anthem:
"God save and protect our Emperor, Austria..."

A Shocking Day

In the middle of lessons, the door of our classroom suddenly opened. They looked straight at me and called my name. What I saw was dreadful. My Angela was hanging in the teacher's arms, screaming terribly. Her face was red all over, and from her mouth white foam was running down in streams. For a moment I thought she was dying.

Just as she was, they gave her into my arms and told me to carry her down the stairs. But already on the first bend she slipped from me and fell to the floor.

I was ordered to run for Viktor, the school caretaker. I found him in his flat and barely managed to stammer out what had happened. He came at once, lifted her onto his shoulder, and carried her to his bed. I was sent to run home to tell them to come for her.

It wasn't a short distance, and the whole way I wept bitterly. Mother, who had just been stirring maize porridge, was terribly alarmed. She grabbed some blankets and a pillow, piled them on the cart, and together we hurried back towards the school.

Angela had calmed down a little. We lifted her onto the cart, but she took no notice of anyone – as if she didn't even know us.

The doctor found that she had epilepsy, and that her blood was diseased. He ordered that no one must ever insult her, nor should she be allowed to get upset.

For half a year she did not go to school. She was given the best and most carefully chosen foods. Once an excellent pupil, she now received an ungraded report.

The doctor said epilepsy is an illness which sometimes disappears on its own, and sometimes never at all... not much comfort there...

People advised all sorts of supposed remedies. One farmer claimed to know a "certain cure": the heart of a mole, smoked in a chimney during the May devotions. Only that, he said, could help epilepsy. Needless to say, we never tried it.

Another lady recommended homeopathic remedies, which she obtained from Kranj. They came in three little bottles labelled: *Nux Vomica, China,* and *Pulsatilla.* Prayers – the Lord's Prayer – were to be said alongside them, according to instructions. But these medicines did not cure our Angela either.

One night she was so unwell that she began to rave. Our parents didn't know whether to run for the doctor or for the priest. I felt so sorry for her.

Only when she grew older did she finally settle down. Yet she was left with a painful memory – and a twisted spine. Still, since she was a quick learner, after finishing school she attended *Krištof's Course* in Ljubljana. In a year she trained as a clerk, studying mathematics, typing, bookkeeping and shorthand. I used to dictate to her from one of Ivan Cankar's books – for Cankar had the finest Slovene prose. She eventually found a job in Ljubljana, in a locksmith's office.

My world in turmoil

The First World War

The First World War broke out and lasted four long years. I had already finished the six-class primary school, but I attended the last class voluntarily for another year. Then came the order that we must vacate the school, as soldiers were coming. We carried out the benches and the blackboard, and I swept the floor. Afterwards they brought in bundles of straw. We pupils moved to the old school and even into the dairy, where we had lessons only twice a week.

Soon food began to run short – or perhaps some was being hidden, for there was no sign that the war would end quickly. It had started with the crime in Sarajevo, where the Austrian heir to the throne and his wife were assassinated. Austria immediately declared war on Serbia, later Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, and soon after, Russia as well. With the Serbs it was quickly settled, but on the Italian and Russian fronts the fighting was fierce.

Rationing was soon introduced. But it was utterly chaotic. First we jostled for ration cards outside the town hall. There was no order, no proper queue – it was simply "who could shove hardest." We got flour at the shop, and again there was pushing, shoving, quarrelling, shouting. At home, I was the one tasked with this tiresome duty. Once my umbrella was broken in the crush. Another time I had managed to push almost to the counter, but people pressed so hard against me that I nearly fainted, and they had to clear a space so I could get some fresh air.

Every morning, I queued for milk. At most I was given half a litre. In a household of nine people that made little difference. But we had to eat. We didn't taste sugar for two and a half years – not even the sick or children. Once a fortnight we might get half a kilo of beef. From the farmers it was impossible to obtain anything, even for high prices. They kept to themselves, or bartered.

There was no electricity yet. Paraffin was rationed so strictly that we kept it only for the most essential use. In winter, on long dreary evenings, we sat by the warm stove, listening to the sad thunder of guns from the Soča front and the Italian border.

When soldiers marched along the main road, we could hear the band from afar. We all came running to watch them close by. Now that the war had begun, all soldiers wore grey uniforms. The bright red trousers had disappeared at once – too visible from a distance. In front marched the trumpeters; somewhere in the middle the wind band. At the end of the band a little donkey was harnessed to a cart carrying the great drum, nearly a metre across. As the drummer marched beside it, striking it so the sound rang through our ears, the donkey plodded meekly forward, step after step. There was also a row of small drums. The big brass instruments – I didn't know their names then – gleamed in the sun. The soldiers were marching off to the front. God alone knew how many would ever return.

The rear was still entirely safe, for there were no aeroplanes or helicopters yet. Where the war zone began, people had to abandon everything and flee wherever they could. It was hardest for the farmers, with their livestock. Even in Vrhnika and its surroundings many refugees arrived. They brought with them big horned oxen. They came to us to have the oxen shod. The beasts were so strong that even men struggled to control them.

Once such an ox broke loose from the stall. An apprentice tried to hold him by the chain. Everyone shouted: "Let him go, let him go!" But the lad still fought on, until at the garden fence the ox rammed him up against a post and bolted off through the village. The apprentice seemed shaken, but held on until evening. That night he was in a bad way. The other apprentices brought him water, but didn't call us. Next day the doctor was summoned. He found that Janez had internal injuries and there was little hope for him. Father came from Horjul and took him home. Fourteen days later we went to Horjul for his funeral. Janez had departed for ever. He had been a gentle and good lad. He and I had been good friends – perhaps I understood him better than most. He had a stepmother at home, but in Styria a sister, who meant the world to him.

My father, like other craftsmen – wheelwrights and blacksmiths – received orders for large, strong army wagons. There was great urgency. They worked late into the night, often till midnight. I too would help. I broke up coke, so the apprentices didn't waste time on it, and meanwhile I sang. When they were preparing the iron tyres for the wheels, I helped too – holding the hot band upright with great tongs while the apprentices struck it in turn with heavy hammers, and the master tapped out a rhythm with his small hammer:

"From Sunday unto Sunday,
Potatoes every day,
potatoes every day."

The heaviest hammer weighed five kilos, the lighter three and a half. At other times I helped stretch the hot bands onto wheels, or drilled holes in them with the machine. Sometimes I cut threads for the bolts of army wagons and made the nuts too. In this way I also contributed to the quicker progress of the work.

When Father was in good spirits he sang while working. He had his own favourite song:

A blacksmith lit his pipe of smoke,
And sat in wisdom by the stove,
Chi-di, chi-dai, chi-do!

He smoked a long-stemmed pipe. Tobacco t was actually very cheap – just one Kreutzer for a packet.

A Friend

At our neighbour's I had a friend and classmate. She was truly a model and helped shape my character. A little older, but far better than me. She had beautiful, neat handwriting and was excellent in everything. Kind-hearted, with a slightly mischievous nature, she was always coming up with something original. I was utterly devoted to my Francka. On the way home from school we would walk arm in arm, talking in confidence, sometimes even whispering secrets.

After school she went to learn dressmaking. On All Souls' Day we went around the graves, comparing which were more beautifully decorated. Then Francka had the idea that she would like to see the parish bells. We secretly slipped into the unlocked belfry. There hung a huge bell, with two smaller ones a little lower – though they too were quite large. We admired the bells that called day after day to prayer, then made our way down the worn, creaking stairs. But alas! The door to the belfry was locked. Oh, how careless we had been. Now we would be stuck there until noon, when the sacristan came to ring. We sat disheartened on the steps and mourned our plight.

But sacristan Tone took pity on us. Mischievous as he was, it was he who had locked us in the belfry. He pretended to scold us: "What

are you doing snooping around the belfry?" But in the end, we were all laughing.

Francka, kind and good as she was, caught the eye of Vinko, the painter's son. He often came visiting, and I felt quite left out. Yet tragedy was already lurking, ready to destroy this young love. Francka began coughing, and the doctor diagnosed consumption – tuberculosis. In those days it was incurable. It was only a question of how long the illness would last, for it always ended in death.

When I visited her again, she looked at me very sadly and confided: *"Ivanka, I give my young man over to you. Nothing will come of me – I am consumptive."*

It struck me like a bolt from the blue. I was bewildered and deeply saddened, not knowing what to do. I knew Vinko was a good and honourable lad, but I had never even thought of boys in that way. And so, he was won by another girl, one who knew how to charm.

Francka grew weaker and weaker, and finally died beautifully prepared for death. But in that house consumption took hold. After Francka, her brother died, and after him their mother too.

The End of the First World War

Everyone was weary of the war and longed for peace. And indeed, in 1918, we finally lived to see it. The soldiers returned exhausted from the front. At the end of our garden lay a wide parish meadow. There the army train troops gathered, with their horses and wagons.

Our neighbours and the other women of Nova Vas did not bother cooking at that time. Instead, they wandered among the soldiers, buying army sheets, canvas, and various provisions for very little money. The soldiers were simply selling things off. But my parents

refused to buy anything. They said: *"That is not honestly earned; they are selling off state property."*

One soldier even offered my sister a cow for a paltry sum, just to be rid of it. She refused. From the upper room I watched the soldiers slaughtering a pig. They let it loose, and when it came around the wagon, a soldier struck it on the head, so it fell unconscious at once. Then they leapt on it and cut its throat. They came to us to ask if they might roast and fry the meat, offering to buy some wine too, which would have made for a fine feast. But Mother spoiled it all by saying firmly: *"No!"* Father, however, asked if they would give us the intestines, and I prepared them deliciously with onions. Father and I enjoyed them, though no one else in the house would touch them.

In the smithy we had Czech soldiers. From sheer joy they could not sleep – they sang the whole night through. At one point it seemed we were to be saddled with fifty Hungarian soldiers in our loft. Father and I used every bit of our German to persuade them that only two officers would be lodged in the upper room. We feared the filth and chaos fifty men would make. In the end, we were spared. But the officers were not to be disturbed.

A National Guard was formed. My father too enrolled, was issued with a rifle, and patrolled at night. But he was bitterly disappointed. He was forced to witness wholesale looting of military property. If he tried to prevent anything, people mocked him as a fool. He had gone in with the best of intentions, but soon gave up.

The soldiers departed, leaving broken wagons and quite a few horses, which no one cared for. Hungry and thirsty, they roamed about all night long. It was autumn. We had a heap of carrots by the house. That night was a chase round the yard as the horses sniffed them out. By the next night the carrots were gone. Here and there a dead horse lay abandoned.

Father took in two of the horses, fed and watered them well. He fetched a broken army wagon, repaired it, and then we all – everyone who was fit for work – went into Trček's wood, cut firewood for the winter, and brought it home. Afterwards Father handed the horses over to the municipality.

Gradually the wounds of war began to heal. A new era dawned – something of an awakening. The *Orli* gymnastic society, which had existed for some time, continued, and their rivals, the *Sokoli*, proudly lifted their heads again. There was also the "Craftsmen's Association", which maintained a reading room and staged plays.

It was then that the May Declaration appeared. Delegates of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs presented it to the emperor in Vienna, declaring their wish to be free and to form their own State. After deliberation, permission was granted for independence. Political rallies were organised in the larger towns. Such a rally was held in Vrhnika, too. The speaker arrived by train, it was the leader of the Slovene People's Party, Dr Anton Korošec, who was also a priest. He was welcomed by people wearing national costumes – I was among them myself. I can still see him now, speaking with such fervour about the May Declaration.

Everyone was enthusiastic about having a state of our own, as we Slovenes imagined it. The Slovene tricolour was proudly displayed. In Belgrade the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (S.H.S.)[3] was founded. The Serbs were named first, being the most numerous and already an independent state. The Croats followed, and the Slovenes were pushed to the last place. The king was a Serb – Peter II Karađorđević. He continued the hereditary right of the Karađorđević dynasty. We Slovenes felt, deep down, that we were being treated as inferiors. But what could we do?

3 S.H.S.: the letter H stands for "Hrvatska", the Slavic word for Croatia.

King Peter II was old and frail, so he had a regent – his son, Alexander. On his father's death, Alexander Karađorđević became king. This was in 1918.

Political parties flourished, and the atmosphere, especially at election time, was extremely tense. The strongest party was the Slovene People's Party. Opposing it stood the Liberal Party. There was also the Social Democratic Party. During elections, all sorts of mischief went on. Agitators bribed voters with goulash, and sometimes even with money. The campaign raged for a fortnight beforehand, pulling voters this way and that. Votes were already tallied in advance, and then they went out to foment agitation again.

My father was a trusted man of the Slovene People's Party, though the actual campaigning was left to younger, more energetic men. Women did not yet have the vote.

My Father Passed Away

Father was growing weak and took to his bed. The doctor said we might as well hand back the craftsman's licence. We dismissed the apprentice. In Nova Vas the blacksmith's hammer fell silent for ever.

Father had bowel cancer. He lingered for about half a year. His death struggle was hard. A few days before the end he began to rave. On the last day he was calmer – we knelt around him, reciting the rosary. At his head burned a red candle which our parents had long kept for the final hour. Then he began to fade, and soon breathed his last.

I was overcome with grief. I went out on to the parish meadow. It was half past two in the morning, and a full moon shone down, bearing witness to my sorrow at the loss of such a dearly loved father.

The funeral was very beautiful. The choir sang for him. Yet everything felt empty once Father was laid to rest.

At night the little oil lamp still burned on the stove-bench. Tončka and I whitewashed all the rooms with lime. Then we discussed how we were going to manage for our living. Mother's wise suggestion was accepted. From then on Tončka and I, being seamstresses, would provide for all the household needs.

The blacksmith's tools we sold off at auction. But there was always plenty of sewing to be done.

Social life

The Founding General Meeting

We received an invitation to attend a meeting on Sunday afternoon. A good many of us girls went, including some from Verd and Stara Vrhnika. We filled the hall of the Craftsmen's Lodge. All the Vrhnika *Orli* (Eagles – the Catholic youth movement) came to the meeting as well. On the stage sat the leading officials.

When everyone fell silent, the speaker began. At the top of his voice, he cried:

"Fire, fire!"

The girls leapt to their feet – the most curious were already at the windows. Then the speaker continued, more calmly:

"But where is the fire?"

"Do you not know? The fire of the Orli spirit is burning!"

He went on to explain that we should form a women's branch, the *Orlice*. They helped us elect a committee. By ourselves we wouldn't have known what to do, but they promised their support. We set up an organisational committee and a technical committee.

Thus, we were entirely independent and not at all dependent on the *Orli Brothers*. We called ourselves the *Orlice Sisters*.

We had gymnastics twice a week, and once a week a girls' evening. Not all the Orlice took part in gymnastics, but they were still regular members.

Drama also flourished at that time. Scarcely a Sunday passed without a play being staged. The craftsmen performed, and especial-

ly the *Orli* and *Orlice*. A few days before a play, small flyers were distributed to the houses, listing which part each actor would play.

I attended such a rehearsal for the first time. The director was Nace Hren from the village called Verd. On stage he had his brother, who was to play an old consumptive grandfather. He was teaching him how to act out a consumptive cough. Watching this, I found myself gazing at that "old man." Of course, I didn't know him – how could I, when he had only just returned the previous week from military service in Judenburg (Austria) I asked the girls who he was, and they told me. That man remained in my heart forever.

The craftsmen were preparing the play *"Deborah"*. They were in difficulty, and thought of me – would I like to act? Oh, how I had longed for this! Naturally I accepted with open arms. My part was lovely: I played a young Jewish woman with a baby in a wooden hut. A blind man crawled in and asked me whether the moon was shining, and so on. The play turned out beautifully. At last, I was on the stage – something I had so greatly been longing for.

The Orli and Orlice staged the play *"The Wild Huntsman"*. There I was only an extra. We performed it four times, to the great delight of the audience, and afterwards we even went on tour to Logatec.

During the rehearsals, as we stood behind the scenery, I got to know the man of my dreams more closely. Before, we had been complete strangers, but now we always ended up together – there was something between us, and I was thrilled to be at his side.

Performances

The *Orli* and *Orlice* organised public gymnastic displays. National displays were rare – they required several years of preparation. Such events were held, for instance, in Maribor and in Ljubljana. There were more district displays. The Vrhnika *Orli* district was large, and it was lovely to meet one another at these gatherings. Each section of the *Orli* marched in under its own banner.

In the morning there was a festive parade. We marched in six-abreast formation. At the head walked the leader, then two rows of six, followed by another leader with two rows of six, and so on. To the rhythm of the brass band, we seemed almost to "float" towards the field designated as the *Orli* camp. There we heard the ceremonial speech, sometimes also a performance by a choir, and in the open air an altar was set up, where Holy Mass was celebrated. After Mass finished, the assembly dispersed.

In the afternoon at three o'clock there was the joint gymnastics display. "Joint" because gymnasts from the various district sections – or *Orli* circles, as we then called them – also performed. At times it was not easy. Though we had the same free exercises, we often performed them rather differently. It did not always go perfectly, but we didn't trouble ourselves too much about that.

After the display came free merrymaking at the tables. The *Orlice* baked cakes – all free of charge: tarts, biscuits, honey dumplings, doughnuts and more. They also cooked frankfurters and sausages, and sometimes a tasty *Szeged* goulash. The *Orli* provided the drinks.

For each event there was always a preparatory committee. They took care of everything needed, including the supply and erection of the maypoles. After the event the net profit was divided equally. As a rule, the treasuries of both *Orli* and *Orlice* were considerably replen-

ished. And no wonder – for everyone worked without pay and even contributed from their own pocket. We worked out of sheer enthusiasm for our *Orli* cause.

Singing

What would a young person be without singing? Singing uplifts, delights, and consoles. We had a Men's Choir, a Women's Choir, and a Mixed Choir. Once a week we held rehearsals, led by the curate. We learnt many beautiful songs which stayed with us throughout our later lives.

Elections were being prepared. The first agrarian reform was being promised. The candidates declared they would take land from the great landowners and divide it among those willing to cultivate it. As no one volunteered to write out the candidate lists, I offered my help. I spent a whole day in the curate's house writing them. The elections went well, and indeed some large estates were expropriated.

Soon afterwards the curate, who was also the choir director, asked me if I would copy out music for him. I was given new work, which I gladly accepted. I put great effort into writing it out neatly – in special ink, only one copy. Then it was lithographed (duplicated), and everyone sang from my scores.

How very much I longed to sing in the church choir! Our Angela had the good fortune to be part of it. I begged her to speak to the choirmaster on my behalf, but she replied: *"I'm not going to recommend you - you can do it yourself!"*

But with my shy nature ... I never dared. And so it remained just a wish.

A Little Letter Arrived

We were performing a play. Because it was hot in the cramped dressing room, I stepped out onto the balcony. Soon after, a young man I knew – Štefan Sedej from Vrhnika – joined me. From his way of speaking, I quickly realised that he wished to get to know me better.

He had white hair, was a little taller than me, and had attended the school for organists. He was a war invalid – his skull had been fractured, and he had a metal plate in the crown of his head. Yet this was scarcely noticeable, and so he had been admitted to the organists' school. For a time, he even led the singing.

Our conversation was soon interrupted by my beloved Janez, and before long we all returned to the stage.

Two days later, however, a little letter arrived with a very clear message – Štefan desired a closer relationship. I did not reply, thinking to myself: *"Silence gives nine answers."*[4]

One day I was standing on a double ladder by the vine, picking grapes, when Štefan came by. At once he climbed up beside me on the ladder. He asked if I had received his letter and how I responded to it.

I replied firmly and clearly: *"I think Maček's Mica is waiting for you – she already has her dowry prepared, so it is your duty to go to her!"*

He said: *"That will never happen. It's over – for good!"*

He saw that there was no hope. We understood one another perfectly.

4 A Slovenian saying!

God's Kinfolk

To the east, somewhere between Borovnica and Notranje Gorice, stand three steep hills. On each of them there is a little church: on one, St Joseph, Mary's spouse; on another, Our Lady of Sorrows – also called Mount of Sorrows; and on the third, Mary's mother, St Anne. Women who could not have children would go there to seek help.

Every Whit Monday there was Holy Mass on the Mount of Sorrows. The church there is something special – it must also be very old. On either side are two great candlesticks jutting out of the wall – in fact, two large black arms ending in fierce claws. On the right-hand side there is a side altar, and on it a glass coffin. Through it one can see the head of a mummified saint, his body clothed in a priestly robe. This is St Secundus. Lower down the hill there are a few farms, but no inn.

Once we set out for the Mount of Sorrows in a small company of lads and lasses. We had arranged things with a boatman who had a small boat, just the right size for six people. As agreed, we came at four in the morning, but he was still asleep. Slowly he woke up when we tapped on his window and came down to the boat. We pushed off. Through the reeds and bushes, singing and laughing, we glided along the Ljubljanica river. We reached the steep Mount of Sorrows safely. At ten o'clock we were at Mass. Many more people stood outside the little church.

We looked at the stalls selling all manner of pretty trinkets. I too received a gingerbread heart with a tiny mirror and an inscription. Afterwards we cheerfully returned to our boat.

On another occasion we again went by boat to the Mount of Sorrows. This time the boat was large, and there were more than twenty of us. It was from the days when bricks from the Vrhnika brickyards

were transported to Ljubljana by river. There were no trains yet, let alone lorries. The cheapest way was by boat. They loaded the big boats with bricks – there was no need to row, for the river carried the boat to Ljubljana by itself. On the way back they rowed upstream with the empty boat. It was such a boat that carried us once more to the Mount of Sorrows. We returned on foot, across the Blate marshes and through Bistra, back to Vrhnika.

The first time I was on the Mount of Sorrows, I was about fifteen. The Vrhnika Deanery had organised a procession for peace. The dreadful First World War was raging then, with no end in sight. We set out at four in the morning from the Vrhnika church, walking all the long way to the Mount of Sorrows. All the way we prayed and sang hymns to Our Lady. As we passed Bistra the sun was rising, greeting the long procession of fervent supplicants.

Fate Goes Its Own Way

My sister Angela and I were hoeing potatoes on a rented parish field. We went there in the fiercest heat. Neither of us was used to the sun, and we both suffered so much that it seemed even the earth itself should pity us. We sighed and wiped the sweat from our brows, when Angela said: *"You know what, I don't want a farmer for a husband."* And I replied: *"Nor do I!"*

But as it turned out, we both ate our words. In the end, both of us freely chose a farm boy – later, a farmer husband...

As for me, I was at a crossroads at the very time the war broke out. I searched and scoured the newspapers, looking for a suitable position for myself. I applied in various places as a shop apprentice, but

there was never any result. I offered myself to a photographic and artistic studio in Ljubljana.

My parents held me back from rushing off on the first train to Ljubljana to present myself. Then a message came – they had already taken on another pupil. I sobbed from time to time the whole day long. Afterwards, I simply turned to sewing, which I was already skilled in, and it came easily to my hands.

Towards the Goal

An acquaintance from the Sodality of Our Lady, where I too was a member, kept asking me if I had already decided to join the nuns. She would not stop pressing me, asking if I had made my choice. I replied: *"Give me another week to think it over."*

That week I truly reflected on what I really wanted. I realised this: *I wish to have someone by my side, who would live with me and be everything to me. I want to have my own home, which I would arrange in my own way. And above all, I want to have many lovely, sweet little children, whom I would raise to be good, upright people."*

That was my life's motto.

It was already the year 1925. The Orli movement had spread to immense proportions. Events followed one after another. We also had social evenings, and at carnival-time cheerful gatherings with bacon pastries and doughnuts. Once, I even performed on such an evening. I had quite a role – I played chaperone to my daughter, teaching her how to behave so she might win admirers.

By this time, I had already grown very close to my dream man. But things did not go smoothly. Other girls were also finding him attractive. They tried all manner of ways to invite him, drawing in parents

and friends alike. Not just one, but several were hoping for an early match. My dream manas I still call him, was courteous and kind to everyone. He had a magnetism about him, a charm that drew people near.

This was not easy for me. All I had to offer was my honesty and my love, which did not seem much to set against so many rivals. Yet I was overjoyed simply to look secretly at his photograph. Any day I saw or met him was a happy, blissful day. He returned all my attention, and after many turnings and delays we finally agreed that he would ask my mother for permission to marry.

Mother was somewhat touched, and a little surprised. She raised no objection, for she could see in our straightforwardness that there were no hidden troubles between us.

We went into the room, where we settled on the date of the wedding – it was to be during Carnival-tide. I wished in that time to gather a little more knowledge of cooking. I still had three months left. I also had to sew a few more things for my trousseau. I began learning to bake bread – in the big oven, enough for the whole week. From then on, I always did the baking.

Mother was very strict. At the time, I thought her fussy, but later I was very grateful. Bread may be baked in many ways, but not every housewife knows how to make truly good bread.

My Cooking

Afterwards, I went to Ljubljana to learn cooking. I already knew how to prepare ordinary meals quite well, but I wanted to learn how to make something finer too. I arrived at an office canteen, where food was cooked daily for more than ninety officials.

I was given white coats and short white aprons. Yet on the very first day they handed me a sack-like apron. I was a little startled, but I saw that the housekeeper, the maid, and the servant girl all wore the same. Just before the guests came in for lunch or supper, we removed those aprons again, for they were heavy and clumsy.

So, my training began. The first job each morning was to prepare soup vegetables in a two-litre pot. In a large kettle we cooked beef broth every day. I had to cut different meats, sometimes even offal. But I was still very left-handed. Until then I had cut everything with my left hand. I struggled with my right hand, which was clumsy and awkward. Whenever no one was watching, I quickly and neatly cut with my left.

In the afternoons, when there was more time, we tackled cakes. Once we made a tart. The housekeeper brought a cookbook, and I had to carefully read through the recipe. Then she said: *"Now, get on with it!"* and shut the book. I was in great distress. How was I to begin, when I did not even know how to whip egg whites? She watched me sternly, without any friendliness. This was not how I had imagined learning cookery. At last, she dictated: break the eggs, and so on. Then she said: *"Now stir for half an hour – always in the same direction."* Of course I had to stir with my right hand. Oh, how hard it was! I looked at the clock – the hand barely moved. That I was strongly left-handed remained my secret. If I had told them, they would have laughed or despised me. I added a little sugar and stirred another quarter of an hour. My arm hurt as if it would drop off. I thought to myself: *"If all pastries and such delicacies require such torment of stirring, they will always be hateful to me."*

Another time was just as disheartening. They planned to bake a Gugelhupf. The flour was prepared in a large bowl. But all the other ingredients were carried into the next room. I was left behind in the

kitchen. In the dining room the maid was making the dough, while I, who had come to learn cookery, was not allowed to watch. My heart grew heavy – this way I would never learn anything. But I was allowed endlessly to scrub the stove. I was allowed to fetch water so that every evening the maid could scour the kitchen.

I slept inside the big kitchen table. The lid was lifted off, and there was my bed. The maid and servant girl slept on the floor in the hall. Each morning, we carried the mattresses up to the attic. I had already been there a fortnight when the housekeeper's name-day came. She baked a fine potica cake for the occasion. But again, I was not allowed to see how it was made – how the dough was rolled out, the filling prepared, and so forth. All was done in the dining room with the maid. I was again set to scrub the large iron-clad stove.

The next day I was meant to go home for a visit. I stoked the fire so the oven would be hot enough. The potica was already placed in the oven. After a while she drew it out to see how it was baking. But alas! The tin slipped from her hands, burning hot, and fell to the floor. The half-raw potica rolled out of the tin, broke into pieces, and lay scattered under the oven. There was much sighing as they picked up the half-baked lumps and pressed them back into the mould. My feelings were peculiar – I did not pity her at all; in fact, I rather maliciously enjoyed her mishap. I hid behind the stove and kept scrubbing, though it was already clean, and struggled to suppress my laughter. Woe betide me if it had burst out loud!

The next morning, besides coffee, I was given a slice of that unfortunate potica. Though it had collapsed, it was very, very good. But of course, they dared not offer it to guests.

So, I returned to Vrhnika. I told them I would learn nothing there. I described everything in detail, with tears near my eyes. Mother too thought it was not right and advised me to give up and come home.

And so I did. On Monday I told the housekeeper I would not stay. I handed back the sack-like apron. She said: *"Ivanka, I am nervous."* I replied: *"You are nervous, but I am sensitive."* And with that, I quickly took my leave.

For several days I pondered what next.

Again, my dear mother came to the rescue. She went to Mrs Kompare – we were distant relatives. At once she agreed to take me on. A new beginning! My first tasks in the morning were to fetch wood if needed, and to fill the kettle with water. She showed and explained everything clearly, concealing nothing the way they did in Ljubljana. When we had time, we also wrote down recipes we had tried out. Here I truly had the chance to learn something. I shall always be grateful to her.

The days flew by too quickly. I learned to cook well, and could prepare finer dishes too. Now my evenings were filled with sewing – always until ten o'clock. I wanted to have everything beautiful. I could also do machine embroidery, and now I used this skill for my linen. I embroidered curtains with national patterns. They were indeed very lovely.

My fiancé often came to see me in the evenings. He always found me at the sewing machine. He too was preparing for the arrival of a new housewife. Until then they had had a black kitchen with sooty walls, as in old times in Dragomer. Their house was already two hundred years old, built of stone, with exterior walls three-quarters of a metre thick. Everything was renovated. They scraped down the plaster in the kitchen – a hard and tiresome job – only the vaulted ceilings remained. The kitchen furnishings were new, the stove and everything else had to be renewed.

We ordered a bedroom suite from the carpenter. It was made of Slavonian oak. He truly did his best – it was the finest suite he had

made so far. There was even a great *"psyche"*, as we called it then – a large mirror with cabinets.

Preparations were completed. I had also to bid farewell to my beloved Orlice. I wrote them a farewell letter, carefully composed. They read it at the girls' evening gathering, and it touched them deeply. By then I was no longer among them. I had already been three and a half years the head of the Vrhnika Orlice. I had led them to many performances, directed gymnastics and instructors' practices, and also kept the instructors' minutes. I even sent in an article, which was printed in our paper *"Vaditelj" (The Instructor)*.

Now a new path in life awaited me. I was well prepared to face whatever difficulties might come.

Married life

With my husband Janez on our wedding day.

The Wedding

Before the wedding, we were cleaning the house. I intended to scrub the floors, but Tončka said to me: *"Now you won't be scrubbing anymore!"* She would not allow me to help. Restlessly, I ran about in a cotton smock. Then the door opened – the Orlice had come to say their farewells. Among them was the president of the Orlice and two others. They gave me, as a keepsake, a figurine of an eagle – a bird with powerful claws and beak, standing proudly on a steep rock. It was porcelain and became a cherished memory for me.

"The last evening at home," I kept repeating to myself. I went to bed early, for the next day something very important awaited me – the step into married life. When the lights were out, we suddenly heard digging outside the house. *"What does that mean?"* I asked. Tončka replied: *"Ivanka, they're putting up wedding maypoles for you!"* It was the lads from my part of the town. They set them up, fastened a sign, and quietly slipped away.

The next morning, early, the wedding party arrived with a zapravljivček– a carriage with oiled axles and springs, intended for transporting people – the groom Janez, his brother Nace, his younger brother Francelj, and Janez's close friend, Janez Tinetov. We welcomed them with a good meal, and then we set off for Ljubljana for the wedding.

We went to St Peter's Church, where the ceremony was performed by our former Vrhnika curate, Father Torkar, a personal friend of my Janez. After the wedding, Father Torkar congratulated us in the sacristy, saying: *"May there be many little Orli (Eagles)!"*

Afterwards we went to "Šestica" for lunch. Then we went to the theatre, where we had a box. We watched the play *"Second Youth"* – quite symbolic for our day. In the play, a doctor invented a remedy that made a man young again. He had an adult son, but once rejuve-

nated he began dressing and behaving like a youth. His wife looked at him bewildered. She too was persuaded to consider rejuvenation. Then came the confusion: the son had a sweetheart, who invited him to meet that evening. But the father received the note and went in his stead. So youthful was he that the girl did not recognise him. The muddle was complete, until the father realised the folly of his rejuvenation and persuaded his wife not to follow suit.

Towards evening, the train brought us back to Vrhnika. Meanwhile, a reception had been prepared at my home. It was a lovely gathering. Janez's elder brother Nace gave a speech, saying they had been without a woman's hand at home for over a year. He himself was already living separately, but at home there were still four Hren brothers. He asked me to be a mother to them all and to manage the household happily, for they were eagerly awaiting me.

Then we walked to Verd, to my new home. In front of the house a triumphal arch with an inscription of good wishes had been erected – the young men of Verd had put it up. Suddenly, Nace, Janez's brother, seized me by the waist and carried me over the threshold, saying: *"Here you will live from now on!"* We chatted a little more and shared some refreshments, but soon the tiring day was over. The brothers went their separate ways, and I was left alone with my husband.

I received some lovely presents, but the finest gift was from my husband himself. I was astonished. He gave me a savings book with twenty thousand dinars. I had not expected that, after all the preparations and renovations, he would still have money left over. We discussed how to manage finances – whether we should each keep our own purse: his from the trade, mine from the farm. I said to my young husband: *"My opinion is this: shared life, shared money. If there is any surplus, I will deposit it into savings with this book."* Janez agreed.

The First Working Day

I haven't yet mentioned that my husband was a shoemaker. He had two apprentices and a journeyman, while he himself was the master. Once again, I was hearing the sound of hammer blows – only this time they echoed a little differently.

The first day after our wedding, which fell on a Sunday, everyone was free to go wherever they wished. In the morning, we went to the cowshed. The cows needed to be milked. Up to then, my Janez had always done the milking. Now I too had to learn. I had always been afraid of cows. Wherever I met them, I kept well out of their way – after all, they had horns. But now I had to get used to them, like it or not.

Janez told me I should satisfy the curiosity of the village onlookers by driving the cows to water. He said: *"All you need to do is walk behind them with a stick."* And indeed, I managed it without a problem. It made me laugh, and the villagers' curiosity was satisfied too.

We dedicated that first day to getting acquainted with the household inventory. So, we spent the whole day tidying and organising all the rooms. And in between we had much to talk about, for until then there had been no such opportunity.

I had already seen the fields and woodland beforehand, so I knew where they were and what the land was like, the land I would now be working. Now I was a farmer's wife. There were eight fields and three and a half hectares of meadows. The forest was fine too – large and conveniently close to the house.

The second day, I was already milking the cows myself. We carried the milk to the dairy in Vrhnika. There was also much work in the workshop. In the evenings, when I had finished everything in the

cowshed and the kitchen, I joined the men in the shoemaker's shop. We would sing folk songs together, and I would hand Janez the nails.

Before long I had learned to sew on the shoemaker's machine. At Easter time, there was always a rush of work in the workshop. I helped by rasping the soles and giving the shoes their final coating of varnish. Soon we bought a second-hand women's sewing machine. On that, I sewed uppers for slippers, and later I even stitched the leather uppers for shoes.

Evenings in the workshop were lively. Two of Janez's brothers were shoemakers, while Karel, another brother, worked as a carter, hauling logs from the forest. The eldest brother, Nace, owned a pair of horses and traded in timber. He lived at his wife Jelka's homestead, where the horses were stabled. With those horses, brother Karel transported the wood.

Every morning Karel rose at four to feed the horses. Since he was lodging with us, once the horses were taken care of, he cooked breakfast – and as he was already cooking, he made enough for all of us. So, when we got up, we had a meal ready. After breakfast, Janez and I went to the cowshed so that by seven o'clock everything was already done.

Before long the field work began. We carted manure onto the fields. Others did the heavy work, while I helped with loading. I grew to enjoy this work, oddly enough – there was something strangely appealing about it. Later I even learned to drive the cows myself. They would plod along slowly, half asleep, towards our fields near Bistra.

But that first year was very rainy. The fields had been poorly tilled before, so with such wet weather, couch grass sprouted everywhere, with roots running deep into the soil. I worked hard and even hired labourers, but by the time we had hoed one end of the 150-metre-long field, the weeds had already sprung up again at the other.

There was no question of mechanical hoes back then – all work was done by hand. I began to lose heart, and it looked as though the harvest would be meagre. But my husband comforted me: *"It isn't wet every year. When the season is drier, the yield is better and larger too."* Later I saw he was right.

Winter came round again. We had stocked up with firewood and logs for the stove. Each day I lit two stoves – one in the workshop and one in our bedroom. The bedroom stove was already quite venerable. It was green, beautifully made, and very well varnished, with only a few small chips. If it could have spoken, it would have had many stories to tell. It was so large that the whole family could have warmed themselves at it.

That year I fattened two pigs. By New Year they were ready for slaughter. I had been used to this work from home. We boiled the black pudding (blood sausages) in the great cauldron, which was quicker. Janez's youngest brother Jaka and I made them together. All day, the neighbour's cat had been meowing on the manure heap. We became suspicious, and Jaka threw a piece of firewood at it. The cat dropped as if dead. Shocked, we buried it in the muck with a fork. The neighbours were very fond of that cat, and we felt awkward for having killed it. But only five minutes later, there it was again, mewing in the same spot! We laid it nicely in a box with a blanket and even gave it a piece of sausage – though it wouldn't touch it. After a while, it padded home. We wondered if it would denounce us.

At Christmas, I set up a nativity scene in the corner. They had never had one before. With the crib, I brought true Christmas atmosphere into the house. Naturally, on all three holy nights – Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, and Epiphany – we blessed the house by censing and sprinkling it with holy water. Following old custom, which I was determined to preserve, we went through every room, even the cow-

shed and pigsty, under the hayrack, and around the house, reciting the rosary aloud. Later, when the family grew, we became quite a procession, walking one after another through the deep snow.

For my first Easter in the new home, I again upheld tradition. I said to my husband: *"You, as master of the house, should have the honour of carving the meat, the potica, and distributing the painted eggs."* But he replied: *"I know you'll do it better and more gracefully."*

So, we shared the Easter meal together – the blessed food, as we called it: the meat symbolising the Lamb of God, the round potica symbolising Christ's crown of thorns, horseradish representing the nails of the Crucifixion, and red eggs symbolising Christ's blood. The potica had to be baked in a fire kindled from the blessed Easter fire, and the meat and eggs likewise cooked over it. This fire, carried on tree fungus[5] from place to place, was taken from the great Easter bonfire lit early on Holy Saturday morning by the parish church. By half past five, the boys had raced all the way from Vrhnika to bring it to us. They did not run in vain – they were rewarded with coins, and sometimes with a slice of potica, a painted egg, or an orange.

The whole week was filled with preparations for this greatest of feasts, Easter. From Wednesday onwards, the children ran with their rattles to the church in Vrhnika. Each day at four o'clock, the Easter vigils took place. The priests sang in Latin, and at the end the dean struck the altar three times with a rod. Then all the rattles clattered at once – even those in the choir loft. It was a great din, to the delight of the children, who had waited all week for this moment.

5 This was a piece of smouldering tree fungus used as tinder to carry a fire's ember.

Something I Regret

How closed-off and self-absorbed people sometimes are – and I was no exception.

It was a fine sunny day when a young girl came round the corner of the house, carrying a heavy peddler's basket on her back. She set it down on the ground – it was clearly very heavy. Inside she had earthenware cups and a few little clay pots. She offered her goods, but I refused. I thought to myself that my Janez might think I was the sort of woman who bought anything anyone tried to sell me.

The cups were small, everything seemed rather unnecessary to me at that moment. The girl said: *"Believe me, I've gone through the whole village already, and haven't sold a single piece of pottery."* She heaved the heavy basket back onto her shoulders and walked away sadly.

If only I had called my Janez and said to him: *"Let's buy the lot, basket and all – it's not as though we're so badly off."* The girl could then have gone home cheerful and content. And as for us – well, life is long, and I would surely have found use for those cups and pots somewhere along the way.

Our First Child

I was expecting our first child. He was born in 1928 – a son, our first-born Janez. So, he was Janez's Janez. Words cannot describe how happy we were.

He was born in the maternity hospital in Ljubljana. I was utterly unprepared for caring for a baby, and I hadn't read a single book

about it – if such books even existed at the time. All the more, therefore, I listened carefully to whatever anyone told me or advised.

My little one was beautiful. He had light eyes and fair hair. He brought a new joy into our household. Even my husband's brothers spoke to him and took turns carrying him.

Our little Janez thrived well, for I had more than enough milk for him, and he tasted nothing but chamomile tea besides. He was nursed this way for thirteen months – until his place was taken by his sister, Marjetka.

The Second Child

In July 1929 our second child, Marjeta, was born, also in Ljubljana. She was very lively. Whenever she could, she wriggled out of her swaddling clothes or pulled her little arm free from a sleeve.

One afternoon, while I was out feeding the livestock, I found the pram empty, with the baby's wrappings lying on the ground. Beneath them, Marjetka was sleeping peacefully.

On Shrove Tuesday the mummers[6] came – some lads from Old Vrhnika. There was a whole band of them, led by an accordionist. They burst into the room with stamping and dancing. Only with great effort did my husband persuade them to leave again. In the room, just behind the door, my baby Metka was sleeping. She was

6 A tradition on Shrove Tuesday has ancient Slavic roots. Long before Christianity arrived (around the 8th–9th centuries), the old Slavs who lived in the area that is now Slovenia celebrated spring renewal festivals. These festivals were connected to nature, fertility, and the changing of the seasons. People wore masks and costumes to scare away evil spirits, banish winter, and call for good harvests. The noisy parades, bells, and animal-like costumes were meant to wake the earth and bring sunshine and growth. The *Pust* tradition is based on ancient Slavic beliefs about nature's cycles and life's renewal..

not disturbed in the least and simply carried on sleeping as if nothing had happened.

By then I also had some help – a maid, who assisted mainly with the fieldwork and the livestock. Meanwhile, the workshop was busy and earning well. More than once, I carried our savings to the bank.

But a strange situation arose everywhere. There were more and more unemployed people. Many pressed out from the towns into the countryside, hoping they might somehow survive there. I pitied them. They asked for work, but I gave them only money. Strong, healthy men, in the very prime of life, wandered from house to house begging for help. How humiliating that must have been for a working man.

A Change

Much changed at our house during this time. My husband's brother Nace set up a large modern sawmill in Verd. My husband Janez helped him by standing as guarantor, so that Nace could obtain a loan from the savings bank. For this, Janez pledged all his property as security.

Once the sawmill was well under way and there was plenty of work, Nace persuaded Janez to give up shoemaking and come to work at the mill. It was not an easy decision for him to lay down his cobbler's hammer. But as he suffered constantly with stomach pains, it was in fact necessary for him to change his way of life. Together we decided to end the shoemaking trade in our family, which had already been a tradition. My father-in-law had been a shoemaker, then Nace, then Janez – and with him, it ended.

Now they were all employed at the sawmill. Brother Karel, who had previously been a carter with horses, was now the foreman. Brothers Francelj and the youngest, Jaka, were labourers, while my Janez was the tallyman – measuring the logs that the farmers brought from the forest.

Yet unemployment spread everywhere, affecting all businesses. It was general – not only in our country but also in Austria, Germany, Italy, indeed all over Europe.

And so, unemployment reached Hren's sawmill too. They could not secure enough money for wages, and so they were forced to dismiss workers. Everyone dreaded this.

It was the year 1932. I had a baby then, our third child. She was born at home. That very night, as if on purpose, a full metre of snow fell – even though it was already the eleventh of March. My husband and the midwife waded through the deep snow. And so, Katarina was born – a baby with brown skin, dark eyes and darker hair.

Little Janezek and Metka were already running sturdily around the bed, where I lay with their new little sister.

A Fruitful Year

The year 1932 was truly fruitful. We harvested so many potatoes that our cellar was filled right to the top – there was no way to fit in even one more basket. Six sacks were still standing under the hayrack in November. For those six sacks of potatoes, we bought three large sacks of the poorest quality flour. It was dark grey. Yet the bread baked from that flour was very good – downright delicious.

One evening my Janez came home with news that struck me hard. He had been dismissed from work. He and his brother Nace

had agreed that Janez too would leave, so that the workers would not say that there was favouritism. I was worried, but my Janez comforted me, saying: *"We are provided for through the winter and beyond. We have three sacks of flour, so we won't go without bread. We have produce, and there will be plenty of meat and lard in the house too. And I can still make shoes – I already have a few orders."* And so we managed. We did not do badly, for we knew how to make every dinar count.

My world in turmoil again

Assassination

King Alexander did not rule in a particularly just way. By conviction he was a Sokol[7], and it was whispered that in France he was also a member of a francophone lodge. He had his salary paid in French francs. He did not want our dinar, and for that we resented him. Then suddenly came an order that all organizations must be immediately dissolved, except for the Sokols riding around on their high horses. With this he struck a heavy blow to our well-developed secular organisations. Sadly, they disbanded. They had much inventory - what now to do with it? There was expensive gymnastic equipment. Everything was packed away and locked in cabinets.

King Alexander once again, as many times before, set out for France. The King travelled by land, his wife "Mariola" by the longer sea route. They were to meet in Marseille. King Alexander and the French Prime Minister Barthou drove through the city of Marseille. The crowd greeted them enthusiastically. It was packed. In that throng someone climbed onto the car and fired twice, then disappeared into the crowd before anyone could react. The King collapsed and within a few hours breathed his last. Barthou, however, was not seriously wounded.

Then the Queen also arrived in Marseille. A tragic message awaited her: the King was dead. He left three sons. The first was named

7 Liberal organisation, opposed to the Orli, who were conservative Catholics, supported by the church.

after his grandfather and was Peter. The second was given a Croatian name, Tomislav, and the third a Slovenian name, Andrej.

What was happening meanwhile in the capital of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, in Belgrade?

Early in the morning, at four o'clock, they woke the King's first son Peter and told him: "Get up at once, we will proclaim you King." Peter was frightened and resisted, since he was still almost a child, but it did not help. He was immediately crowned King. Because he was not yet capable of ruling, a regent was appointed in his place - Prince Paul. He ruled instead of the King. The state was renamed "Yugoslavia." Prince Paul governed wisely and more justly. He was impartial. In time, secular organizations were once again permitted. The young King Peter meanwhile studied and prepared to assume royal duties.

We came once again into better times. Unemployment ended. Work went on at full steam. Now my Janez was foreman of the night shift. Work continued day and night. And the earnings were good.

On our farm we abandoned manual labour. We bought a cultivator and a ridger. Potatoes and corn we planted in long rows and cultivated everything with a horse. We no longer mowed by hand with scythes, but someone cut for us with a mowing machine. Before, our boys used to rise early, at two in the morning, to cut while the grass was still wet. Now it was much easier for them, and also for me.

A Man at Rock Bottom

I witnessed the greatest human misery one can imagine. Let me describe it here, so you may understand what a human being is – and how far one can be humbled, whether through one's own fault, or not.

Day after day beggars would knock on our door, and Fridays were their special day for begging. Winters were harsh in those years. Trees cracked in the cold, and snow crunched underfoot. Those who had a home huddled close to their warm stove. But where could the homeless seek shelter? They would often creep into cowsheds to warm themselves by the livestock.

One bitterly cold winter's day, with deep snow everywhere, a beggar came through the front door. But what a sight he was! Old, frozen, with mucus hanging from his nose, which he hadn't even wiped. I gave the maid some money to take to him. The beggar muttered something. The maid said, *"I think he says he's cold."*

I followed him as he shuffled over the threshold and invited him into the kitchen to warm up. I brewed him a large mug of tea and poured in some rum. I told him: *"If you wait half an hour, you'll get some dumplings as well."* He gladly waited.

His overcoat was sprinkled with what I thought was sawdust. His eyes – those eyes! – looked so strange. The whites were entirely yellow. His fingernails too were yellowed.

As I was preparing the dumplings at the table, he secretly scratched his neck and picked off lice, dropping them onto the red-hot stove plate. I saw it – yet pretended not to. When I moved closer, I saw that he was crawling with lice, especially around the neck and collar, where I had thought it was sawdust. They marched up and down, and the poor wretch could not sit still. That explained the yellow fingernails and eyes.

He received a large bowl of dumplings, which he devoured ravenously. He was without doubt starving.

Afterwards he stood up and thanked me warmly, saying: *"Now I am well again. You have saved my life. Out there I had already sat in*

the snow for some time, waiting for death, but then I forced myself to rise and go on."

I reflected on how far a human can fall. He too had once been born to a mother, nursed at her breast, cradled in her arms – yet now here he was, humiliated and broken, utterly destitute.

Surely he never rid himself of those lice, which must have drained the very life from him. Afterwards, I carefully cleaned everything. I carried the chair outside into the snow and scrubbed all thoroughly. I feared the lice might have spread to my family – but thankfully, nothing happened.

Sometimes Gypsies came to our door. With them, I had little compassion, for they were work-shy. While we toiled under the hot sun, they idled in the cool shade. They lived by endless begging and stealing. They were seldom satisfied. Poor Gypsy children – what kind of milk did they drink? They would go from house to house, collecting a little milk in a filthy tin. Imagine what sort of milk that was! Or fat scraped from the top of a sour pot, mouldy and yellowed – they said it was good, and that they fried it with onions!

Once, however, a Gypsy woman came to me asking: *"I beg nothing else of you, only if you have some chamomile. My child cried all night in the cowshed."* The Gypsies had quarrelled because they could not sleep. I gave her a nice bag of chamomile – poor woman, with her baby. Another time a Gypsy woman asked for any kind of swaddling clothes, as a birth was imminent on the road above Verd station. I gave them a washed sheet, which they gratefully accepted.

Once I was visited by a young handsome Gypsy, scarcely fourteen years old. When he smiled, he revealed dazzling white teeth. I struck up a conversation with him. A newspaper lay on the table. He said he could neither read nor write. I encouraged him to learn – *"It is not*

too late! How wonderful it will be when you can read the newspaper and sign your own name!"

But he replied that he could manage without such things. His godfather had been a schoolteacher. When he was of age, the teacher had put him in his class. He lasted five days in the school, then ran away and never returned.

The Gypsy boy then expressed what he desired from me: a red scarf to tie neatly around his neck. As I had no red scarf, I gave him a very fine pink silk scarf with broad brownish stripes. He took it gladly, flashed his beautiful teeth once more, and left.

The Year 1936

Once again, there was new life in the house. Our fourth child cried out – a boy. I named him Valentin, because I liked the name. When I was still at home with my parents, we sometimes prayed: *"Honour to St. Valentine, that he may protect us from unknown illnesses."*

My little Tinček, as we called him, grew well, he was a real glutton. But alas – disaster soon threatened to take him. He was only four months old when he fell gravely ill. He lay still, his arms limp at his side, neither crying nor eating – he looked almost like a little corpse, so quiet he was.

Dr. Marolt came and diagnosed pneumonia. There was no medicine, as the child was too small. He said: *"Give him mallow tea by the spoonful. If nature is strong enough, he will overcome the illness. If not – he will die."*

The thought of my beloved Tinček dying was unbearable. I fed him mallow tea, but I no longer knew what else I could do. The maid, seeing my sorrow, said to me: *"Where I worked before, when things*

were really bad, they would make a vow to Mary Help of Christians at Brezje (the main Slovenian national Marian pilgrimage site)."

In my distress and fear, I too entrusted him to Mary at Brezje: if he survived and grew, we would go together to Brezje when he was eight years old, and able to pray himself, to give thanks to Mary Help of Christians for his life and health.

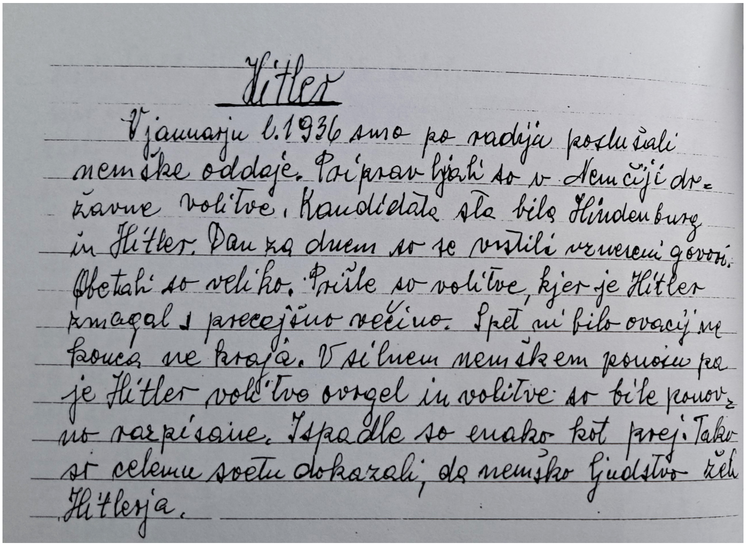
And behold – after midnight he gave a soft cry, a sign that he still lived. From then on, he began to improve. By morning he was already able to eat a little, and then he quickly recovered. My little baby lived and was healed.

When need is greatest, God's will is closest!

Hitler

In January 1936 we listened to German broadcasts on the radio. Germany was preparing for national elections. Day after day, there were impassioned speeches, full of great promises.

Then came the elections, in which Hitler won by a large majority. Again, there were endless ovations and celebrations. In this way, they demonstrated to the whole world that the German people truly wanted Hitler.



Hitler

V januarju l. 1936 smo po radiju poslušali nemške oddaje. Pripravljali so v Nemčiji državne volitve. Kandidata sta bila Hindenburg in Hitler. Dan za dnem so se vrstili vzneseni govori. Obetali so veliko. Prišle so volitve, kjer je Hitler zmagal s precejšno večino. Spet ni bilo ovacij ne konca ne kraja. V silnem nemškem ponosu pa je Hitler volitve ovrgel in volitve so bile ponovno razpisane. Izpadle so enako kot prej. Tako so celemu svetu dokazali, da nemško ljudstvo želi Hitlerja.

Ivanka's hand writing.

MOTHER DIED

My mother, who had been ill for some time, finally ended her suffering. That golden heart, so rich in kindness, has now stopped beating. Oh, I know that in heaven she is at peace.

When I was still a little girl and my mother was preparing to go to her Easter confession, I once asked her: *"Mother, why do you go to confession, when you have no sins?"* She only gave me a gentle smile.

Now she lay quietly among the flowers, as if asleep.

It was in 1937 that this gentle soul – our mother – passed away.

Life goes on

Accident

Work at Hren's sawmill was going quite well. All the Hren brothers worked there, and there was plenty of work.

Francelj, younger than Janez, was stacking planks. The planks somehow slipped, and his leg was caught in between. It was broken, with a long and severe wound. It was wintertime. Back then there were no ambulances – only the train was available. So, they laid him on a cart and took him to Ljubljana with horses. I bandaged his leg with two towels made from homemade cloth. They were immediately soaked with blood. Francelj was deathly pale.

After three weeks, Janez went to fetch him from the hospital. He carried him from the hospital onto the tram, from the tram onto the train, and again from the train onto a cart, which brought him back home to Verd. I had prepared him a bed on the ottoman and cared for him as best as I could. I even brought him books to help pass the time. He stayed at home for three weeks. Then once again the same ordeal – back on the train, the tram, and so on.

In the hospital, they broke his leg again, as it had healed incorrectly. The pain was even worse than the first time it had been broken. He stayed another three weeks in hospital, then three weeks at home. Then, in despair, he returned once more to the hospital. This time they did not break the leg, and he remained home for longer.

As a patient, he was tolerant and grateful for everything. But the wound never fully healed. In spring, as the snow melted, he hob-

bled around the house on crutches. Around this time, Nace bought a house next to the bridge, where there was also a tavern. Since Francelj was no longer fit for heavy work, they agreed that he would become an innkeeper.

Now all he lacked was a good wife, capable of running the Inn. At that moment, he had no sweetheart, as he was still recovering from a breakup. Yet suitors for his favour came to us, since he could not go anywhere. We secretly laughed at these "candidates", and Francelj remarked: *"Look how hard they try to prove they would be capable."*

Francelj recovered. He was now walking without crutches. The Inn was opened. I went to help him. We had to wash all the kitchen utensils we had bought the week before in Ljubljana. I even served the first guest with wine myself. For the time being, Sikit's mother took the role of housekeeper – she was an excellent cook.

In time, he finally decided to marry, and his bride went to train in another Inn to learn cooking. The wedding feast was held at the bride's family home.

The Economic Society

An *Economic Society* was established in Vrhnika. This society was engaged in trade. Its president was the Dean of Vrhnika, Father Kete, while the clerk responsible for bookkeeping and financial matters was Miha Opeka.

The society had been declining for quite some time and had already fallen into debt. While private traders were managing well, this society was gradually collapsing. An annual general meeting was convened, at which a completely new committee was elected. The com-

mittee then chose a president from among themselves. The choice fell on my husband Janez

He declared: *"I accept the presidency, but only on the condition that you do not sell the house."* They had intended to sell the building – a large, two-storey house with shop premises – in order to cover only part of the debt.

Janez then took up the presidency. He introduced purchase booklets, into which final sums were always recorded. He also dismissed the bookkeeper and intended to manage the accounts himself. But however much he tried, he could not make sense of the bookkeeping. So, he requested that the Economic Union send an auditor The auditor examined everything and said: *"Draw a line across the books and start completely anew."* This is what Janez did. He devoted all his free time to keeping the books properly. Janez was still employed at the sawmill, since being president brought no pay. Only at the annual meeting did he receive some small reward.

The first and most difficult year came to an end. At New Year, members came with their booklets to settle accounts. From the total purchases each received one percent back – in goods. Customers were satisfied, as other traders gave nothing at all. In addition, Janez had already repaid a good portion of the society's debt to the savings bank.

The second year he was able to return one and a half percent. And so it went on: he repaid the entire debt and saved the society's house.

Then the shop manager fell ill and died. Janez placed adverts in the newspaper, seeking a new manager. Many applied, but the committee could not agree on any candidate. At that point, someone suggested: *"Why are we looking for a manager? Couldn't our Janez, our president, take on the role? He could be both manager and president at once."*

They spoke with Nace, to see if he would release Janez from his work at the sawmill so he could run the shop. Nace was not overly enthusiastic, as Janez was a trusted worker. But he also recognised the need for him to take over the shop. And so, they agreed – and my Janez became a trader.

He sold goods as though he had been in trade all his life. He had two assistants and a shop boy. He went on to establish branches in other villages too. In Verd, the branch was run by his brother Francelj, in addition to his successful Innkeeping.

The Year 1939

A little girl was born to us. We had her baptised Helena. She was of a rather delicate nature. The year was 1939. As with all my children, the godparents were again my husband's brother Nace and his wife Jelca. On such occasions they always gifted us with christening loaves, braided bread, and wine.

For little Helena we bought a new stroller – a car-model – so that the other children would enjoy taking her for walks. She was born on April 13th, and already in May the busiest time of weeding was waiting for me. Therefore, I could not stay at home. My helper now was Metka, who was ten years old. She took good care of the baby whenever I was away.

Pigs

Francelj, the innkeeper and Janez's brother, used to go to Dolenjska (southeastern Slovenia) for wine. On such an occasion in spring, he once bought an entire litter of piglets, since they were much cheaper there than at home. I got the most beautiful piglets. We raised many of them - one year we even had eight. What squealing there was when we fed them! Every other day we received a tub full of good kitchen scraps from the inn.

We also grew a lot of fodder beets. They were huge - I once weighed one and it weighed six kilograms. We also had so many carrots that in autumn we could barely manage to store the harvest. Into each pig stye we poured a whole basket of potatoes.

Later, when the pigs had grown, we sold them to Francelj. At home we slaughtered four pigs. A few years earlier we had also kept a breeding sow. She was large, of a noble German breed, and bore twelve piglets. I carried them one by one in a basket onto the warm stove, because we were afraid she might crush them. Afterwards, she took them back nicely and cared for them, and they all survived until six weeks old, when we sold them.

One autumn in September, however, three pigs fell ill with swine erysipelas. The veterinarian vaccinated them all, but it was already too late, and they died. We buried them in pieces in the garden, covering them with branches and stones.

Afterwards I went to the field. In the barn I still had one big old sow. She showed no signs of illness. But in the evening, when I was returning home on my bicycle, Metka came running towards me, holding her head and saying:

"Mummy, Mummy, something terrible has happened!"

At last she managed to tell me that the sow had broken down the door and run out into the garden. She rooted around and dug up all her dead companions, eating and gnawing the bones - she devoured everything she could. The children watched her in fear, but they couldn't drive her away. I thought she would surely die too. But no - she felt just fine, having feasted so well on meat. The flesh had already turned purple and almost blackish, but the earth had already drawn the infection away, so there was no more danger of contagion.

Another time, the disease of swine erysipelas returned. The pigs were already large and fattened. The butcher refused to come and cut them up, afraid of bringing the disease back home to his place. So, I shut myself in the pig kitchen and set about the work myself. I cut the hide a few times too deeply, but in the end I still sold it. I rendered the bacon, minced the meat, fried it with onions, and packed it into tins to be used gradually.

All would have been well, had I not nicked my thumb slightly while working. I bandaged it and went on, but the next day it hurt more, and by the third day it had turned dangerously red. I went to the doctor and told him honestly what I had been doing. He said: *"Yes, this is blood poisoning from erysipelas."* Fortunately, I soon recovered, and it was nothing too serious.

Children

A few more words about the children. The older ones had already started going to school. Janez was an excellent pupil in his first year and received a book as a prize. In the second year and onwards he slackened a little, but still did quite well. Marjetka was always an excellent pupil. All the time she attended school in Vrhnika, she never

received anything but top marks. Every week she had to write a free essay. Katarina was also an excellent pupil. Throughout her schooling she had only top marks, except once when she received a single „B“. She came home crying with that „B“, and I had to console her, saying: *"I know very well that you know everything. It was just an unfortunate incident when the teachers changed, and the new teacher didn't know that you already knew everything."*

Our diligent schoolchildren were a great joy to us. They were among the best at the Vrhnika school.

Sometimes they even performed on stage. On St. Nicholas' Eve there was a big event on the stage in the Cultural Hall. Janez played a little devil, dressed in a red leotard. Metka and her cousin Barica were angels. Barica was a Seraphim, and Metka was a little "Curly." At home, I tried hard to curl her hair. Her perfectly straight locks didn't really obey me. The weather was damp, and before she even arrived in Vrhnika, the curls had already fallen out.

Before the stage performance, a quartet from Ljubljana played. Then Metka sang a solo: *"Do you know me? I am God's little bird, God's little dove, golden Curly!"*

She wore a sky-blue robe. The Seraph was dressed in pink but didn't have a solo. Finally, St. Nicholas appeared with all his attendants. Every child was given the same gift. Then he also gave presents to the older children.

When everything was over, the musicians teased Metka: *"Where is our opera singer?"*

Illnesses

With children also come worries, especially when they fall ill. Katarina was only four years old when I had to take her to the hospital. A swelling had formed on her neck – red and painful. We waited for two hours until they found a shirt small enough for her. Then they cut open her neck and squeezed out the pus. After five days I went back to fetch her.

The following year she complained of stomach pain. Again, we had to go to the hospital. It was so crowded that patients on stretchers were lying right in the hallway. Five people had already asked what was wrong with her while we were still standing there. At last, they moved her into another building with the other children. They treated her by puncturing the abscesses – she had several purulent swellings in her abdomen. Otherwise, she was quite content and played with the other children. Among them was a boy named Tone, who was the ringleader and entertained everyone. Still, Katarina was very happy to go home when I came for her a week later.

It was beautiful spring weather. The children were playing behind the house – our own, the neighbours', and others. Among them was our five-year-old Valentin He came into the kitchen and told me his throat hurt. He no longer wanted to play, and the pain grew worse. We went to the doctor, who diagnosed diphtheria. We had to go to the hospital immediately. The other children were vaccinated against diphtheria.

Ten days later my eldest son, Janez, fell ill. He had pain around his nose and a high fever. Dr. Klepec came and diagnosed nasal diphtheria. He immediately ordered an ambulance. Janez was so weak he could barely reach the car. He remained in the hospital for nine weeks. In fact, he had paratyphoid fever.

Again, disinfectors came from Ljubljana. This time they brought a small oven with them. I had to hang out all the blankets and open the cupboards. We sealed the bedroom airtight. Then they lit the oven. They instructed me not to open the door for at least three hours, and when I finally did, to run straight to the window and open it quickly, otherwise I might faint. That night we all slept up in the hayloft.

Every Sunday I went to Ljubljana to ask about my children. I wasn't allowed to visit them, since the illness was contagious. They were both in the same building. Janez spotted me as I appeared around the corner and shouted at the top of his lungs: *"Mama!"* Then we called to each other through the double window so we could understand one another. He even brought little Valentin and lifted him to the window. He was very pale and waved at me in greeting, then returned to his toys.

I always brought them some treats. Eventually, that too passed, and both of them recovered.

The Polecat

Day after day, eggs kept disappearing from the hens' nests. Janez set a trap and chained it with an iron chain. Inside he placed a piece of fragrant salami.

That night, when he returned from work, he heard the trap snap shut. A polecat had been caught. It glared at us with hostility, held fast right across its belly.

By morning, when we got up, it was already dead. Because of its valuable fur, I skinned it. The stench was so terrible I could hardly endure it.

In the end, it left us its little pelt as payment for all the stolen eggs.

Fruit

God granted a good fruit harvest. Everywhere there were apples in abundance. The price was low. Farmers from the hills came to my Janez and offered him fruit. They didn't know what to do with it, there was so much.

Janez arranged in Ljubljana with the Agricultural Union that it would buy the fruit. On the appointed day, farmers brought apples and pears to the train station. There they were weighed and loaded onto wagons.

Janez also visited Vrhnika's merchants, and together they ordered kerosene. He often ordered whole wagons of flour as well, also for other traders.

Already in winter, a farmer from the hills brought pears. They were winter pears, fresh and just harvested. Snow had already been lying for some time. Janez bought them for our household. The farmer brought them directly to Verd. We poured them out in a pile in the pantry. They were medium-sized, not sweet but very juicy. At that time, we were just having the pig slaughter, and we quenched our thirst with those pears. They tasted wonderful.

A beekeeper from Borovnica complained that he had no way to sell his honey. Janez sold all his honey in a short time. He also bought one large tin of honey for us. We ate as much as anyone wanted. The children feasted on honey and never grew tired of it.

War again

Military Exercises

Something was brewing, something was being prepared, but we ourselves still didn't know what. It was September of 1940. My Janez was called up for a month of military exercises. All the crops were still in the fields. We were drying the second cutting of hay. All the responsibility now fell on me.

That year was wet. The hay was rotting, and the potatoes in the ground as well. Janez left to a place called the Devil's Garden, near Čabar – somewhere on the Croatian border.

We harvested the potatoes – about a third of them had rotted – and gathered some of the hay. I wrote Janez a nice letter, telling him how I was managing the household and how much we were all eagerly waiting for his return.

After a month, to our great joy, he appeared again on our doorstep. For the children, he brought a large bowl of hazelnuts he had gathered in the Devil's Garden. We were all overjoyed.

Confusion

In the spring of 1941, the military conscripts were once again called to arms. My Janez went away for the second time, again to the Devil's Garden I was preparing to iron the laundry, but I couldn't get even a bit of coal from the blacksmith. Easter holidays were approaching, and on farms everything had to be ironed, scrubbed, and cleaned –

that was the custom. I went to Francelj to ask him to lend me some coal. But he said: *"Forget the ironing and the coal – run quickly to Polak's factory. Strange things are happening there."*

I went to Polak's factory, where the Yugoslav soldiers (members of the Royal Yugoslav Army) had a huge food warehouse. The soldiers had abandoned it, though it had been guarded night and day before. People had broken in and were helping themselves to whatever they wanted. Before leaving, the soldiers had blown up the barrels of oil and mixed in cigarettes, pasta, and rice. Oil was running across the large halls, and we waded through it in our shoes – shoes that never shone again. From the ceiling hung red clusters of peppers.

I also went into the blacksmith's workshop to see if there might be some usable tools, but someone else had clearly already thought the same. In the corner was a huge pile of corn, which people were filling into sacks and carrying away. I found a good army trunk and began filling it with pasta and rice. When it was full, I tied it together somehow and started dragging it down the stairs. Everything was soaked in oil, which ran down the cement steps. I managed to push it a little lower when someone shouted: *"Everybody out! At four o'clock they're going to blow up the factory!"*

Should I believe him? Or was he just envious? I saw everyone running, so I dropped everything and fled by the shortest way. In the end, I took nothing at all.

On the road toward Verd, four boys were rolling a huge barrel. People were curious what was inside. They said it was vinegar. People were also saying that the soldiers were going to blow up the railway bridge at Borovnica. The soldiers were fleeing that way as they left Vrhnika. Late in the afternoon, there was a terrible explosion. The detonations lasted for some time. We all immediately knew – the great railway viaduct had been blown up. It had been one of the rare

ones in Europe. The officer who had received the order to destroy it (they say he was Slovenian) is said to have wept as he was forced to destroy something so magnificent.

Evening was falling when my sister Tončka's husband came to ask if they could take shelter with us – rumours were that the factory would also be blown up. They came with their necessities, blankets, and even a radio. We gave them a room. All of us were worried. In the evening, we prayed the rosary together.

The next day we received an order to bring all radios to the municipal office. I loaded Tončka's radio and ours onto a cart and drove them there. The room was full of radios. The following day we had to fetch them back again – they feared the municipal building might be bombed. In the end, Polak's factory wasn't blown up, and my sister's family returned to their home.

Then came another order: all horses had to be delivered immediately, under threat of punishment for refusal. With a heavy heart, my son Janez and I led our beloved horse Pubi to the municipality. Around the municipal building, it was full of horses. Nace, my husband's older brother, was then the mayor. He whispered to me: *"Everything is chaos – just make sure you are the last."*

Officers were inspecting and registering the horses. The whole morning passed. By noon the horses grew restless, hungry, and thirsty. At half past twelve, we were all told to take our horses home again. And that was the end of it. What a relief!

It was Good Friday. Each year on this day I would go with my youngest children to Vrhnika to "kiss the Lord" in church. This year, too, we went. But as we came to the main road, I saw soldiers marching toward Vrhnika in neat formation. One officer asked me in Italian: "*Prego, è qui Vrhnika?*" *("Please, is this Vrhnika?")* I told him yes, Vrhnika. Then they marched in mightily.

On Holy Saturday, I went to buy something from France the shopkeeper. He teased me, singing: "*Vsi so prihajali, njega ni blo. Boš videla, ne bo ga, vsi so že doma...*" *("Everyone was returning, but not him. You'll see, he won't come, all the others are already home...")*

It struck me deeply, but I didn't let him see. I couldn't stop thinking of him, who was everything to me. And now – he wasn't here. Had he fallen somewhere? I baked potica, cooked meat, and coloured Easter eggs. Would we truly eat the Easter feast alone, without our dear father?

But look – he came! I don't know who was happier, he or I. The heavy weight that had lain on us all through that Holy Week was lifted.

At the border where he had been stationed, chaos reigned. They learned that the soldiers were abandoning their positions, laying down their weapons, and going home. Even the officer didn't know what to do. He told them: "Wait until the very end." So, they waited a few more days and then left. For the Vrhnika men, it was unsafe to travel home in uniform. Janez and a few close friends stopped in Bloke, where the priest was Tone Gradar from Verd. He had gathered some clothes in the cellar, so they changed out of their uniforms and continued home.

Jaka, Janez's youngest brother, was at that time serving his regular military service. He too was caught in the great confusion. He didn't know what to do – he feared returning home because he was in the standing army. But there were no orders. Finally, he and the others decided to go home.

Strange things were happening. Huge piles of Yugoslav banknotes were burned. No one took them, since Italian money was already in circulation. Yet in some parts of the country, Yugoslav money was still being used. These were simply days of total confusion.

In Upper Carniola and Styria, the Germans occupied the land. They pushed further south toward Croatia and Serbia. Yugoslav soldiers were retreating with oxen pulling supply wagons. The Germans advanced with the most modern weapons, while the poor Yugoslav oxen could hardly move out of the way. Ljubljana was occupied by the Italians. Rationed food, already scarce, now disappeared altogether. Those who hadn't produced anything themselves looked on in sorrow.

Before long, a large Italian truck arrived at the crossroads in Vrhnika. A soldier standing at the front lifted his arm in salute and shouted: *"Farina!" (Flour!)*

In the following days we began receiving the most necessary food supplies. There was plenty of rice and pasta. The Economic Society had to prepare rooms for the Italian finance office, which became one of the main offices. The tax officials were easy enough to get along with. For the chief officer, the shop prepared a Slovenian St. Nicholas gift basket: dried fruit, walnuts, apples, and a few biscuits and candies. When he arrived in the morning, the gift was waiting for him. He was pleasantly surprised: abroad, someone had remembered him and given him a gift.

Trieste

In Vrhnika, my Janez's shop was doing very well. Everything turned quickly into cash. At the New Year they always made an inventory. They worked late into the night. Afterwards, he prepared the balance sheet. On Sunday he brought that big ledger home, and I helped him so it would go faster. I dictated to him, and he wrote it down.

In Trieste (Italy) goods could still be found, especially knitwear, while in Ljubljana there were already shortages. Janez decided to go to Trieste. He invited me to come along. We stayed there two days. We went to a wholesale shop and bought textiles. Janez said: *"Now you choose, according to your taste."* We bought whole bolts of fabric for aprons, three bolts of different silk cloth for housecoats, which were very fashionable at the time. We also bought blankets and some very fine woollen material. We went to the main dairy, where he bought a lot of very good and inexpensive soft cheese.

At the Inn and guesthouse, where we had a nice room, Janez spoke German. I looked out of the window where, in the morning, country women rode bicycles bringing milk to the dairy. I noticed a new device beside the rear wheel – a stand for milk cans. I really liked that contraption.

We went to the fish market and saw very large fish, but also the smallest ones and even anchovies. Everything was beautifully lit with electric lights. We walked in the harbour and looked at the baths. We also went to the marketplace. There were piles of squash, plenty of peaches and apricots, and more.

The goods we bought were delivered by Italian soldiers with a truck.

Already in advance they had announced in the shop in Vrhnika that Italian goods were coming. As soon as sales began, the money came in well. Within a month nearly everything was sold out. The warm winter underwear especially sold quickly.

And what did I buy for myself in Trieste? My first silk slip – at that time still a rarity. For Janez, my eldest son, I bought ten *fovči*8. They were cheap, and he could easily sell them to his friends.

8 A *fovč* is a small knife with a curved blade at the tip, used for carving willow switches and other things.

For Metka I bought embroidery and sewing scissors. For Katarina, who suffered with earaches, I bought a very pretty headscarf. For the maid – a beautiful silk kerchief.

New Confusion

In Verd, somewhere behind the church, Sluga's Tone threw five Italian bombs so that they exploded with a bang. Word spread immediately that Tone had provoked the Italians with the bombs. The Italians instantly began searching, and it was clear that he had fled into the nearby forest. Two of his brothers went with him.

The newly founded Liberation Front began gathering men who were to hide in the forest and from there attack the Italians. Most of those who joined were people who never cared much for real work. From Verd there were only a few such "heroes." The people of Verd mostly gathered in secret and tried to stay in the safe "middle ground," which was the wisest. Elsewhere it may have been different.

The men wandering in the forest - some called them "foresters" - still needed food and clothing. So, here and there, at night they stole from farmhouses, mostly provisions and livestock. People feared them, never knowing when they would be robbed. One housewife had just baked a batch of bread. That evening the "foresters" (later the "Partisans") came and took it all. This happened often. Farmers carefully locked up their pigs.

The Italians grew more agitated. They prepared here and there to confront the Partisans, but did not dare to go deep into the forest.

Since the situation for the farmers grew worse and worse, they pleaded with the Italian command to give them weapons so they could at least defend themselves.

The men formed the "White Guard" and received arms. The White Guard fought against the Partisans. These did not only steal and sabotage trains, but also attacked people who were not enthusiastic about treacherous assaults. The latter believed that national matters should be resolved at the table, not with raids and shootings.

But even before the White Guard was established, something most terrible had already happened. Here words almost fail, because it was too cruel and painful to describe.

For about two weeks, Partisans had been quietly roaming around our house. We watched them through the curtains. Janez said: *"I won't report them, after all, they're our people."*

Then the night came. It was 1942, the night of September 12 to 13. In our branch church, there had been a patron feast day. For the occasion, I had baked a modest potica cake, though not white. I prepared a good Sunday meal when we returned from Mass. That evening we lay down to rest, and Janez contentedly remarked that we had celebrated the feast well.

Around eleven o'clock someone called through the open window: *"Mr. Hren!"* Half-asleep, Janez thought someone was calling him from the shop again. He answered: *"Yes, yes, I'm coming right away!"* That's how it unfolded. I went to the window and spoke, while Janez hid behind the wall in case they threw a bomb.

They became more violent, pressing to enter the house. We resisted unlocking the door. I did all the talking; my husband remained silent. They began looting - food, clothes. Some went into the stable to shoot and butcher pigs. When they had finished, they pressed a revolver to Janez's stomach and demanded to know where else he had hidden goods. Janez answered: *"If I am to be shot, then shoot me here. At least they'll bury me in the cemetery."*

Then they ordered him to dress, saying he would go with them. Once he dressed, they tied his hands behind his back. From the stable they took the finest cow and two pigs, and then departed into the nearby forest. To me they ordered: *"Lock the house and don't come out until four."*

Around the house guards still shuffled about for some time - they were barefoot, only the commissars wore woollen socks. What did I do? I collapsed across the kitchen table in grief so deep I couldn't even cry. I said: *"This too, O God, You have permitted. Without Your holy will, it could not have happened."* I was already five months pregnant. Now my Janez had left for the third time, but surely this time forever. I had lost the dearest being in the world.

The children were the fruit of our love. Metka was home on holiday. She studied in Ljubljana at the classical gymnasium and boarded in the Salesian convent, where the nuns raised her well. My greatest help now was Janez, only fourteen years old. I also had a maid, Zalka, whom we loved like one of our own. Of my husband, there was no word anymore.

The White Guard was later renamed the *Domobranci (Home Guard)*. Now they wore fine uniforms and received a small pay. The organisation grew strong and had its own newspaper.

On the eve of St. Nicholas' Day, I sat in the room surrounded by my little children, all chattering. Suddenly the door opened and in stepped a Home Guard officer - our Karel, Janez's brother. He said: *"This is what we collected among the Home Guard, so you'll have something for St. Nicholas."* He handed me an envelope with money. I barely managed to thank him before he left. I knew he could not bear to look at me and my children - he was deeply moved.

That Christmas we also celebrated as best we could. Somewhere I got some lard and baked a cake, though a humble one. We had a Nativity scene and kept all the traditions.

After New Year, on January 18, 1943, I gave birth to a son. I will not describe the hardship and trials. I was very happy about Baby Stefan - our sixth child. Quietly I whispered to him: *"I rejoice in you alone; you will never know your father. I will raise you into a good man."* I greatly feared he might not be healthy, either physically or mentally. But my grief left no mark on him - he was perfectly healthy. More than that, among all the children, he resembled his father the most. I cherished him as a living memory of Janez.

Štefan grew and thrived. Yet after the birth I was terribly weakened - I could not lift ten kilograms off the ground. I prayed: *"Dear God, only grant me health. I long to work."* Fieldwork began, and though it was hard, with help from Nace and others, we managed. My son Janez found work at the sawmill. He was too young for hard labour, so he was given light work. That little wage, plus what I earned from selling milk, was all we had.

Then came haymaking, which worried me greatly. So much hay to bring in - who would help? Yet it was done, with Nace's help and a few others.

At that time, the Italians withdrew, and the Germans (SS) took their place in Verd. We were sitting at lunch when German officers came asking for a room. I said we would squeeze into two rooms and give them one. So, the next day an officer, Karl Schatz from Stuttgart, arrived. In civilian life he was a carpenter. He had a servant who brought him food and cigarettes - this servant was a farmer from Leipzig.

I spoke German with them fairly well. They were surprised I knew the language. I told them I had learned it in primary school under

Austria-Hungary. We spoke often. One officer asked me how to say *"Ich liebe dich"* in Slovenian. I taught him. The next day he spoke it fluently. I teased our maid Zalka, warning her he might declare his affection. Indeed, one evening he tried to, offering her chocolate, but she just ran away. He was of a calmer nature, and nothing came of it.

I also spoke often with the servant from Leipzig. He had left behind a wife and daughter. They had sixteen cows - by our standards, he was a wealthy farmer. He grew sugar beets, which they hauled by truck to the factory, and were paid in sugar. That year he had received ninety kilograms of sugar. In confidence he told me that on the Russian front things were going badly for the Germans - he had heard it on the radio.

Soon, the Germans in Verd had to march toward Vrhnika and further on. They retreated in haste. Who knows if our acquaintances ever returned home?

With my sister Tončka (on the right) in June 1943.

A New Surprise

It was the year 1945. The date was May 6th. The day was sunny. Suddenly, singing and the sound of an accordion could be heard. From behind, along the road from Verd station, marched men in brownish uniforms. Among them fluttered flags - red and Yugoslavia's flag. What did this mean? Was I seeing correctly? Partisans were marching into the village.

Broken, I sat down by the stove and wept. How could it have come to this? Where were the Home Guard soldiers - among them also my son Janez?

Our children went out to watch the procession so they could tell me what they had seen. Just as I was calming down a little, around the corner came a Partisan woman, cheerfully greeting me and extending her hand. I stared at her in shock, unable to place her. Nicely combed hair, a titovka cap (A *titovka cap* is a type of military-style cap associated with **Josip Broz Tito** and the Yugoslav Partisans during World War II), neat brownish uniform, and brown boots.

"Don't you recognise me? I'm Anica," she said. At that moment, I realized - it was our former maid from Lower Carniola region. She added, "How are you?" I answered: "Thank you, very badly. The Partisans killed my husband, and I have six children." She grew embarrassed and did not know what to say. She looked over toward the neighbour's house, where some young men quickly called her inside. There she boasted to them that she was a Partisan major with great merits. She told how the Germans had once captured her and put her in the driver's cabin of a truck, with the back full of German soldiers. At a bend in the road she struck the driver's arm, wrenched the steering wheel, and jumped out. At that instant the truck crashed into a ravine.

Meanwhile, the Home guard soldiers and others were retreating toward Brezovica. First they fled through Upper Carniola, retreating across Ljubelj pass and halting somewhere beyond the Austrian border. Terrible scenes unfolded. Shop windows were smashed, boots stolen and pulled on. Germans, Home Guards, and civilians all fled together. The crowds went wild. The Germans insisted on pushing through Ljubelj first, and when Home Guard officer Leman demanded that his men be allowed to go first - since they had only light weapons - the Germans simply shot him. Then everyone surged forward. Whoever fell was trampled - woe to mothers with children. Some carried bundles of belongings wrapped in cloth. Whoever had the hardest fists pushed ahead. Gunfire rang out amidst the chaos.

On the Austrian side, they settled temporarily. British soldiers were also there. For a time, coexistence prevailed. Then the soldiers asked the Home Guard if they wished to return to Yugoslavia or go to work in Italy for several years. Who would not choose to return home? They were packed onto trains. The wagons were locked. Armed guards with machine guns stood watch. Then the Home Guard realised: *"We are prisoners."*

In Škofja Loka the train stopped. There, Janez saw his uncles Jaka and Karel for the last time - both officers. The officers were separated; the rest were herded onto trucks. The Partisans treated them with cruelty. An older soldier who struggled to climb aboard was simply shoved, breaking his arm instantly.

The trucks stopped at Šentvid, in the bishop's seminary buildings. They were crammed into rooms so tightly that no one could move. This lasted one day. Then they were sorted into rooms with straw on the floor. Janez and Matjaž, the eldest son of Nace, chose a spot in the corner. Their room was full of young Domobranci. Some despaired aloud, saying: *"They'll kill us all."* But Matjaž encouraged them, say-

ing: *"We know we fought for the right cause. We will not back down - let come what may."* Matjaž was then seventeen, Janez, my son only fifteen.

They were given food once a day - a strange watery potato soup. Afterward, the scraps were divided, for which they all scrambled. Only Matjaž refused to fight for leftovers. Every night trucks arrived to take away prisoners. They were driven to Kočevski Rog (Kočevski Rog is a place of the postwar killings and mass graves in Slovenia) In that room, they all waited, wondering which night would be theirs.

One day Janez and a few others were summoned to the office. They were told they could go home immediately. He went to say goodbye to Matjaž. Matjaž wept as Janez left. Janez said to him: *"We'll be waiting for you at home. Surely you'll be in the next group."* But we waited for Matjaž in vain. He never returned. He fell victim to malice and hatred.

Janez came home utterly exhausted and starving. He collapsed into a chair. I quickly put him to bed and fed him in small portions so as not to damage his stomach after such hunger.

The Local Committee

In Verd there was a local committee. After three months, we finally received ration cards again. The chairman and secretary of the committee came to me saying they would take my radio, supposedly so the wounded could listen to it. A fine comfort it is for a wounded man to have a radio blaring in his ears instead of peace and quiet! But I had hidden my radio inside the pig's boiler, covering it with some unsightly junk. They searched the rooms, poked the hay with

pitchforks. I excused myself by saying I had given it to Nace for safekeeping.

Nace's family and Francelj's family left for Italy. People rushed in and took whatever they liked. Everything was up for grabs. No one stopped them. How ugly people can be when they indulge themselves without restraint, showing all their greed and their worst traits. All the children of Verd had had Nace and his wife Jelca as godparents for confirmation. He had clothed each of them from head to toe and hosted them generously. Now people had forgotten all that and were looting and destroying his property.

At first, people looked at me with hostility, but I had expected nothing else. I faced difficulties head-on, and whenever it became too much, I turned to prayer - reciting the rosary - and truly, the burden was eased. On top of everything, the taxes were so heavy that I could never scrape enough together. Bailiffs kept coming - seizing a heifer, a pig, the sewing machine, the bicycle, and more. I had to pay dearly to redeem them, but there was no other way.

Metka continued studying in Ljubljana. Katarina began learning the trade of shopkeeping. Janez started working as a carter. We had two horses and a timber wagon Things began to improve. I didn't attend voter assemblies; I felt I had to win everything myself through hard work. Politics did not interest me.

"Farmers won't be getting flour ration cards anymore," said Štefin's mother to me. That frightened me. I had to borrow one and a half *measuring containers* of wheat from the Kruc family and one *measuring container* of rye from the Migovec family. In the attic partition, I had enough grain for the whole year. I thought to myself: "I am a farmer. But what sort of farmer if I am always relying on the store? A farmer must produce everything at home." I resolved to live

differently now. Truly, we were self-managing. I set myself this task: "Buy nothing - or as little as possible - produce everything."

We sowed barley, from which I roasted coffee. The rest of the barley I soaked overnight and used to fatten the pigs. We sowed wheat, rye, and corn. We had bread for the whole year, and porridge too. I even planted sugar beets, but they yielded too little syrup, so that was not worthwhile. We sowed millet, dried it on the warm stove, and in winter hulled it in the mortar. From this I cooked milk porridge. When we slaughtered a pig, we made blood sausages with millet. To avoid buying piglets, we kept a breeding sow. We preferred to sell piglets rather than buy them.

We all worked. Even a seven-year-old was already given a sickle to reap corn stalks. At grain harvest we started as early as four in the

With my six little angels: Janez, Valentin, Katarina, Meta and in front: Štefan myself and Helena.

morning, so that in the worst heat of the day we could pause. For the winter we dried fruit. In autumn we shredded two large tubs of cabbage and turnips. In winter we shelled corn and hulled beans. The cellar was full of our produce. The grain chest was full of grain for bread. Even the mice had their share. We raised rabbits, which hopped freely around the stable among the livestock. For a time, we also kept guinea pigs. Every year a hen hatched chicks. Old hens we slaughtered only for feast days. Thus, we never had to buy meat. We learned from the mistakes of the previous year and improved.

And the result?

A family of seven fed itself entirely. The children grew up tough, healthy, and ready to face life, which is not always rosy.

The aftermath

Widow

As long as you have a husband by your side, you are a wife, a lady. But once you are left alone, everyone just looks for ways to take advantage of you, saying: *"Well, she's only a woman, just a widow, and she can't manage on her own!"*

I felt this all too bitterly on my own skin. I was cheated when I sold the old walnut tree by the house, cheated again when I had to sell our horse, Pubi. He had fallen ill, and no one wanted to buy him for meat, though I later learned that such horses were being bought in Ljubljana and turned into sausages. A buyer from Ljubljana agreed to take him on condition that the horse actually reached the city. He did, but there was no trace of the buyer. That is how they treat a widow, who is still learning how to run a household.

But I gathered courage and began managing more firmly and deliberately. I was no longer willing to be taken advantage of - one such bitter lesson was enough. I feared no one anymore. They could do me no worse harm than what I had already endured.

We were weeding a long cornfield. Even though the children's work was a little careless, it still helped, and the whole time I told them stories. The children kept asking: *"Mama, tell us the one about the giant! No, the one about the little dwarves!"* And so, the work got done.

In the evenings, after they had gone to bed, we first prayed together, and then I told them one or two tales.

I enrolled little Štefan in the first grade at the school in Vrhnika. In autumn, when school began, I told him: *"Štefan, walk alone and sing along the way, then the road won't feel so long."*

Since the walk to school was quite far, the children always found ways to amuse themselves before getting home. From under the hayrack, Helena and I could see and hear him: *"Štefan is coming home!"* He was singing, and I welcomed him joyfully.

Fitko

Not long after we lost their father, when the children were still small, we got Fitko. He was just a tiny piglet. A neighbour set him on our window, saying: *"Here, give him some milk and he'll grow."*

Little upright ears, a curled snout, silky skin, wobbly little legs with the daintiest hooves on them. Right away, we were friends. The children chose the name Fitko. We settled him in a crate in the kitchen. Janez immediately made him a little trough. I poured in some warm milk. At first, he refused everything, but once he grew hungry enough, he took to the milk. He discovered it was good and started drinking eagerly. At night, too, I gave him warm milk.

Every day he would toddle around the kitchen - it was still cold outside. Fitko grew, and in spring he had to move to the stable. But so that he wouldn't be lonely, every day after lunch we let him outside to run wherever he pleased. Four children called after him: *"Fitko, Fitko!"* but he never knew which one to run toward. They chased up and down the road, onto the neighbour's yard and back onto ours. We even "talked" together - he, of course, in pig language. With his bright blue eyes, he would look at us, and with his curled snout tug at our trousers or skirts.

One summer's heat tired him out so much that he suddenly vanished from sight. We searched everywhere, calling, but couldn't find him. *"Well now, someone must have picked him up and carried him off, since he was so tame."* It was already three o'clock when suddenly he trotted out from the room. The rascal had taken a fine nap under two beds! Again, we played with him, talked, and stroked him.

Fitko was always clean - thanks to our care, of course - and he never soiled himself while roaming the kitchen or even the room. By autumn, he had grown into a big pig. Yet he behaved more affectionately than other pigs. But come winter, when he had to be slaughtered, no one wanted to stir his blood. In the tub lay his dear head. Those blue eyes were now lifeless.

As a farewell, he left us much meat, sausages, and two large jars of lard.

The Penal Battalion

Overnight, a penal battalion came to Verd. In the morning, we looked out in astonishment. All around us were nothing but soldiers and horses with wagons. They looked wretched. There were both old and young men, their clothes badly patched and even more badly torn.

A young soldier came to me and asked me to sew him a Yugoslav flag with a red star, because they had to decorate the horses. I did him this favour, since he seemed pitiful to me. Hardly had I finished that when another came. His trousers were torn to shreds at the back, and he begged me to mend them. I was afraid, because they were lice-infested. But an officer spared me from this trouble - he pointed the soldier toward a neighbour's house where three girls lived, saying they would sew them up for him.

The officer himself asked me if I could wash and iron his laundry, because he feared lice. I did him that favour as well, since they were poor wretches in need of help. They had been given only worn-out uniforms and were pushed through the hardest battles.

The officer told me that he had seen so many dead, bodies decomposing in the sun, that for several days he had not been able to eat. They were, after all, a penal battalion - sent to the most desperate frontlines.

Horses

We had a lot to do with horses. Just as people have different characters, so do horses. My husband Janez and I decided that we would no longer drive with cows, but that we would have a horse instead. He asked an acquaintance, a horse dealer, to choose for him in Croatia a young and sturdy horse. And indeed, soon we got one.

Let me describe this beauty: he was dark brown, with a very thick black mane, medium build, very strong, and three years old. We didn't even keep a whip in the house, because he must never see one. We drove him only with tongue-clicking.

In the spring, we planted potatoes in Žabjek. My job was to bring seed potatoes after them. I had two little children with me: Janezek, about three years old, and Metka, two. In the middle of the road lay a stump. The horse began to lift his head and shy away. With much coaxing, he skirted it and went on. On the way back he again eyed that stump. I stopped the horse in front of it so he could get a good look. I wound the reins a few times around my arm, then rolled the stump off the road. Just then the horse bolted and ran off. I didn't have time to jump onto the cart. I ran and ran, but the horse was fast-

er. Then I fell and was dragged for a while beside the wheels. I was fully aware that the children were on the cart. At last, I had to unwind the reins from my arm, and the horse, with cart and children, galloped away. I saw Janezek tumble from the cart. Ahead was a bend. I only heard another plank crash to the ground, and then my little Metka, who had been leaning against Janezek, also fell. The horse continued to dash ahead, another plank thundered down.

I reached Janezek, who was crying on the road. Thank God, he escaped with just a few scratches. But where was Metka? A plank lay on the road, but no child underneath. There was no crying to be heard. She had been flung into the hedge. She must have been unconscious for a while. I picked her up and hugged her tightly - she wasn't hurt.

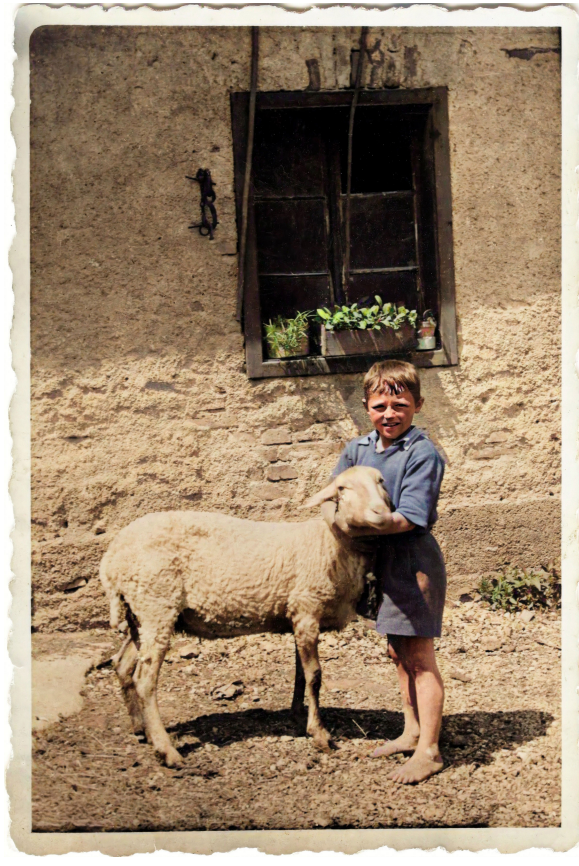
We went on home. I carried Metka in my arms, while Janezek walked beside me. Just before the village, Mr. Retel, the manager of the Lavrenčič estate, came toward me. He had caught our horse and cart and was even standing on it. He helped me pick up the lost planks and even turned the cart for me. I was deeply grateful.

Štefan

The years went by. The youngest son was already at a crossroads. He had finished school in Vrhnika and was wondering what to do next. He would most like to become a pilot - flying high among the clouds and looking down on this wrinkled world.

Janez, who was more informed, explained to him that to be a pilot one had to be an air force officer - otherwise, there was nothing in it.

I suggested Industrial metalworking school. He was accepted right away. He began training as a turner. Every day he commuted home. I attended parent–teacher meetings. They even showed us the



My youngest son Štefan.

workshop where our sons were learning. The large lathe that Štefan worked on seemed rather frightening.

In the industrial school he did fairly well. Only one thing bothered me: during the political lessons they corrupted the boys, teaching them not to believe in God, that a modern person believes in nothing, that what we parents had taught them was just illusion. They said man had evolved from the ape, and other such "wisdoms." The seed was sown, and the youth accepted it.

It was Carnival Sunday. Štefan had no intention of hurrying to Mass; in fact, he resisted, still in his work clothes. I told him: *"As long as you eat my bread, you will also obey me. If not, then find yourself a better place."*

I was cooking Sunday dinner. We had smoked bacon, pork, and cabbage. Štefan hung outside over a tub like a convict. I didn't call him to lunch. We ate and I cleared everything away. Then I sat weaving a basket out of willow rods. It was already three o'clock. Now Štefan was hungry enough and came closer. But I said: *"We have an agreement. If you've rejected everything, then go your own way."* He promised he would go to Mass on Sundays and would improve. Then he was given the leftovers. And he kept his promise afterwards.

I told Štefan: *"It is beneath my dignity to be a descendant of the ape, which is not a very nice animal. With these teachings they are only poisoning you."*

Štefan was caught between two fires. Whom should he believe?

The Years, the Years

The years pass far too quickly. Hardly had we solemnly celebrated my seventieth birthday when I was already well into my seventy-third year. At that time, on my seventieth, all my children gathered together - three sons and three daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and my dear grandchildren. There were already twenty-three of us. That day I was happy and joyful among my loved ones. In the evening, we still sang songs in Katarina's house - songs we used to sing long ago. It seems to me it was for the last time. Now something catches in my throat, and I can no longer bring a song out of myself. Everything passes!

As a gift for my seventieth birthday my children bought me a beautiful wristwatch. It will tick on my hand as long as this heart beats for them. All my life I have lived by the watch. It has been my guidepost. It woke me almost every hour, especially when I was feeding the horses at night. In the mornings, when the sons and daughters left for the train, I too had to be as punctual as the clock.

Even now, if I go somewhere for several days, the watch goes with me. It shows me the time during sleepless nights.

The Indestructible Ones

When I think of all the things I have done in my long life, it almost seems unreal. And yet it was real. Hardship makes a person capable of all sorts of feats. I don't write this so that someone would pity me, nor do I wish to lament the hard times. I want to show how, in hardship, a person finds ways to help themselves - without complaining, since that never helps, without begging or bothering others. One struggles through with their own strength. Not that I never needed help - there were moments when I didn't know where to turn and had to seek aid from someone close. We are all bound to one another. But I resolved to borrow as little as possible from others. I always reminded myself that every debt (no matter how small) must be repaid, and with interest.

In today's world, when there is an abundance of everything, it sounds strange to say that once there was no washing powder, not even soap. Yet I lived through that time. How was I to wash for a family of seven? I boiled my own soap from tallow, caustic soda, and turpentine. Washing powder or soda could not be bought anywhere. I had to make do the way our great-grandmothers did - with beech-

wood ash. I would soak the dirty laundry in a tub with a hole near the bottom. On the stove, I boiled sieved beech ash in a large pot. Once it boiled, I poured the lye over the laundry. After about fifteen minutes I reheated it and poured it again. I repeated this once more. Finally, I left the laundry in the lye for a long time, sometimes overnight. And yes - it came clean, and we managed.

Again, there was a time when not a single umbrella could be bought anywhere. I had school-aged children, and sometimes it poured with rain. The school was far, and they would have arrived soaked. Poor-quality umbrellas broke easily. So I had to repair broken ribs, replace snapped wires, gather the ribs back together, and fix them with a cap. Once I even re-covered an umbrella. The fabric was brown, but it turned out quite well, and we had one more umbrella.

My son Janez wore out his trousers quickly. I often patched the knees, but soon new patches were needed. At one point we decided: *"What if we sew trousers from homemade linen cloth?"* So I bought homespun cloth and sewed trousers. I didn't dye them. Janez figured they wouldn't stay white long, and indeed in the barn he soon stained them gray.

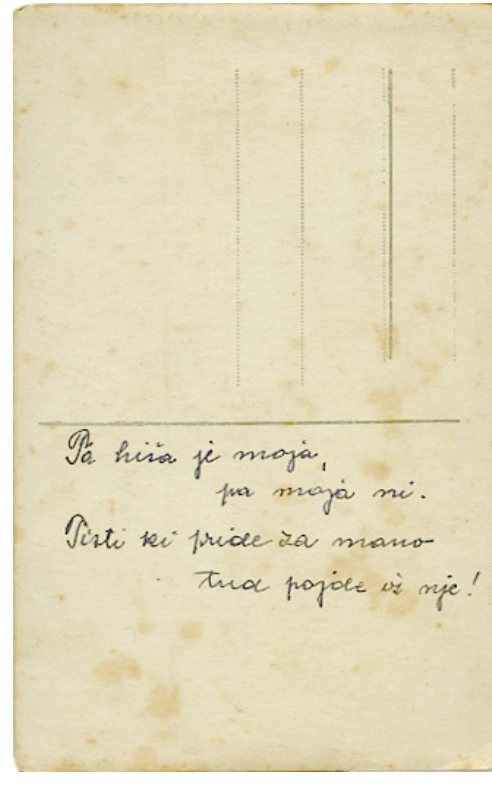
Another problem: there was no thread or sewing supplies to be bought anywhere. But clothes always needed mending - how could I sew without thread? Katarina learned somewhere that people unravelled old stockings and used the yarn as thread. I did the same, preparing dark yarn from old stockings and white from children's worn-out tights - for sewing underwear. Of course, I could only sew by hand, as my sewing machine sat idle.

And then, to our great joy - so much that I could hardly believe it - a package arrived from Italy. It was sent by Uncle Nace. Inside were clothes, and even two spools of thread. What luxury! I set the sewing

machine to work again, patching and remaking clothes for my dear family.

"Forge me, life, forge me,
like iron, so I may be strong,
like stone, so I may shatter
all obstacles that stand
on the path to my heart."

(Fran Milčinski)



Ta hiša je moja,
pa moja ni.
Tisti ki pride za mano
tud pojde iz nje!

Old Slovenian saying

This house is mine,
yet it's not mine.
One who comes after me,
will also leave it!

Epilogue

1981

Life goes on. Nothing has collapsed, even though we no longer have Marshal Tito.

The Sun Shone Upon Me

There are times in life when you are so broken that you cannot see the way forward. Let me begin right at my birth. How happy I am (I only realise this now) that God called me into this world. And He called me to exemplary parents, which is the greatest grace. With them I experienced poverty, lack of money, frugality, honesty, and other hardships and joys that go along with it.

I grew and matured into a young girl, never even thinking about boys. But suddenly, on stage, I saw an unfamiliar young man. He caught my attention - my eyes simply stayed fixed on him. I enquired who he was, only to hear that he was already taken. I swallowed a bitter pill. Later, behind the stage, while we were both waiting to perform in *The Wild Hunter*, I met him in person. Some strange magnet drew us together again and again. I had already become attached to him. He was always so helpful. He loved his motorcycle. Otherwise, he was lively, liked being in company, and girls tried to win him over. But I didn't know how to do that. I only quietly thought of him. His picture, which he gave me, already made me happy.

With a group of friends, I went to Bled. On the island, in the little church, there is the bell of wishes. I too rang it with the wish: *"You who know everything, you also know of my little spark that has been lit. You know what I wish for - please let me have it."* In time, I was truly granted that wish. My dream man became my husband. Words cannot describe how much I loved him. For sixteen years, I was the happiest wife - I had everything I wished for: a home, a loving husband, and a handful of healthy little children.

But around the corner, heavy suffering was already waiting for me. Here words fail me, for the cross I had to carry was dreadful. And yet, looking at God's cross, at the suffering Savior crowned with thorns, made my cross bearable.

Still, the worst came - I lost the dearest person in the world, my beloved husband. Bound behind his back, Partisans took him away into the forest at night. Oh, I could almost convince myself it wasn't true. But bitter reality it was. I was left alone with five small children and one still unborn. They even robbed us of whatever food they found. And now - how to go on? My head was in turmoil. It was a sunny September day, but a sad one. In the pigsty lay a heap of intestines. The Partisans had stolen everything else. In the barn the best cow I had always milked was gone. Now I had to fend for myself, as best as I could. I threw myself across the kitchen table and began to think. Everything that happens, happens by God's will. How could I think that God allowed this? Yes, it was His will. And so, God, who is infinitely good, laid such a great cross on me. He would take care of my orphans. I trusted in Him and resolved to fight, even if weighed down by the cross.

We all worked, each as much as he could. Sometimes we had good harvests. But there were also bad years when we barely grew enough potatoes for seed, and no beans at all, though we had planted over

Impression of the village of Verd painted by Ivanka Hren in 1969.

two hundred poles of them. At such times, I truly wondered what I would put in the pot. The family ate and ate all I cooked, and still wanted more. Then once, I experienced what was clearly the hand of God. I went to the field to spread manure. I was (I am ashamed to admit it) hungry. I had only taken two spoonfuls of food when I watched the children devour theirs with their spoons. Then on the road I found spilled beans. Someone's sack had leaked and scattered them. I jumped off the bicycle and gathered them - grateful that God had sent them to me. There was nearly half a basket of beans. The sun of God's grace shone upon me.

The children grew, and they gave me great joy when I saw that they were also bright of mind. I hoped they would make something of themselves. That was my comfort. They grew up and each found their life's companion. I also began to think about old age and

what would happen to me when my strength was gone. Whenever I thought about it, the picture was grim. But things did turn out well. The good God eventually provided for me too. With all my diligence and worries, I was not entitled to a pension, which others enjoyed. The communists knew only how to take; they never gave a single dinar. Yet I live - and I live well - with my daughter. If I still have a morsel of bitterness left to swallow, that too is God's will. I do not refuse the cross. I accept it, just as I accepted God's abundant blessings.

I have been granted seven special graces. Let them be written down, so that they may shine for my descendants as well.

The sun, God's sun!

Ivanka Hren

"Life goes on. The grave of my grandfather Janez, Ivanka's husband and father of the six Hren children, remains unknown to this day. Every year my father Štefan, his youngest son, lights a candle somewhere near one of the pits deep in the forest - where it was once whispered to him that his father might be. Yet he himself knows that this is likely not his real grave. The truth will be blurred by history, the witnesses are passing away, and only stories will remain - stories of a harrowing time for my nation. Each of us carries our own.

I realise that in her hardest moments, Ivanka chose survival, life, and the future of all of us who follow after her. I feel deeply honoured to be one of Ivanka's granddaughters and to be able to hold in my hands and read her writings. She probably never realised how much she was giving us with them. Now I know what roots I come from. They are strong, true roots - from which fresh green crowns of trees can grow, reaching high into the sky and far forward into new times, into forgiveness, into reconciliation."

Rebeka Hren Dragolič (Ivanka's granddaughter)

History behind the story

Part of Ivanka's story, especially the execution of her husband Janez Hren, is set against the backdrop of turbulent historical events - the Second World War and the internal ideological struggles that defined Slovenia's fate. During this time, the partisan movement, led by the Communist Party, sought not only to resist foreign occupation but also to reshape the political landscape of the country. The brutal executions of civilians by partisans between 1941 and 1945, often targeting those deemed "class enemies," remain one of the most controversial aspects of the National Liberation Struggle. What began as a fight against the occupiers soon merged with ideological purges, leading to the persecution of intellectuals, clergy, former political figures, and ordinary citizens who were considered obstacles to the rise of socialism. While these events were once silenced or justified as a necessary part of wartime struggle, modern historians now recognize them as war crimes - an indelible stain on the country's history.

The Slovenian split between 1941 and 1945 refers to the internal division of the Slovenian population during World War II. It occurred due to the simultaneous occupation of Slovenian territory by Germany, Italy and Hungary, and due to the different reactions of Slovenians to it. The most important organized resistance was the Liberation Front (OF), led by the Communist Party of Slovenia. Part of the population was against communism and the revolutionary goals of the OF. Initially, some of them collaborated with the occupier (e.g. village guards, later the Home Guard). Their main motive was to fight the communist revolution, although they formally presented themselves as fighters against the partisans. In addition to the fight against the occupiers, an internal conflict developed, the so-called fratricidal war between Slovenes – partisans and anti-communist forces. This caused a tragic split: Slovenians found themselves on different sides, leading to violence, repression and reprisals.

1867 – Creation of the Kingdom of Austria-Hungary

In 1867, the Austrian Empire transformed into the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary, where Slovenia was incorporated into the Austrian half. The Slovene people, who had long been dominated by external powers, were now officially part of the empire's southern region. This shift led to increased political awareness and demands for greater self-rule.

World War I – The Collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire

World War I (1914-1918) brought about the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had ruled over Slovenia for centuries. The war led to significant political and social upheaval. With the defeat of Austria-Hungary, Slovenia, along with other South Slavic nations, pushed for independence. The idea of a united South Slavic state, called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), was realized in 1918, marking the end of Slovenian existence within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

1918 – Creation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovenia became part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which was later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The new state was a monarchy, with the Serbian royal family at the head. Slovenes, alongside Croats and Serbs, were granted some degree of self-rule, but tensions remained between the different ethnic groups, especially regarding the role of the Serbs.

1930s – Rise of Authoritarianism

In the 1930s, Yugoslavia moved toward greater centralization of power, with King Alexander I establishing a royal dictatorship in 1929. The democratic system was abolished, and opposition parties were suppressed. Slovenes were increasingly marginalized in the cen-

tral government, which led to growing dissatisfaction, particularly among the Slovene intellectual elite.

World War II – Slovenia in the Axis and Partisan Resistance

World War II had a profound impact on Slovenia. In 1941, after the Axis powers invaded Yugoslavia, Slovenia was divided between Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Hungary. The Slovene population was subjected to occupation, forced labour, deportations, and mass killings. Many Slovenes resisted occupation through the Partisan movement, which was led by the Communist Party of Slovenia and fought for the liberation of the country. The war in Slovenia also saw brutal internal conflicts, with the rise of pro-communist partisans and anti-communist collaborators, resulting in widespread violence on both sides. The post-war period saw the victory of the communist partisans, and Slovenia became part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After the end of World War II in 1945, Slovenia became one of the six republics of the newly-formed Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. The communist regime established a one-party state, and many of the pre-war political elites were either imprisoned, executed, or exiled. Slovenia, along with other parts of Yugoslavia, experienced significant changes in its political, economic, and cultural life, as the country adopted socialism as its governing ideology.

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