

# WWII in Slovenia

## I. Intro + story

Good Morning. I'm Pat Dillon, born a Debevec, an Iron Ranger from Eveleth. And, hi Joe, thanks for joining us today. Joe Petrich & I are 2<sup>nd</sup> cousins. He is my very favorite find from my ancestry hunt. My grandpa Anton Debevec married Agnes Petrich & Joe's grandpa Jacob Petrich is her half-brother. I will cover part of his dad's WWII experience and Joe will follow me with more details.

Chuck & I, Debevecs, aren't related, but our families come from the region of Cerknica. From our mutual interest in our families' history & in translation work we have become good friends. Our presentation is based on our research work.

Today is for learning of & remembering those affected by WWII in Slovenia. We will cover stories & events that occurred close to our families during WWII. I will give a short broad history of WWII in Slovenia & Chuck will expand on history specific to events that took place in Grahovo & Teharje. We will share how WWII affected our families.

My interest in WWII in Slovenia, began with a search of my dad's 1<sup>st</sup> cousin Stanko Debevc. Later I will tell you what happened to him & Joe's dad. Now, I admit my ignorance. I had much to learn & easily got confused. Who were the village guards, the partisans, the resistance? My Debevc family hid the resistance -which ones?

WWII in Slovenia was different, before & after - as **a civil war emerged!** Matija Škerbec, a priest who experienced & wrote of the war said: "the partisans in the forest & the village guards, yesterday were neighbors, friends, sometimes close relatives, working & celebrating together & how suddenly became enemies." The civil war caused much division- healing & controversy continues as history is rewritten. Truth often remains elusive such as the story of my Debevc's family hiding the resistance suggests:

CLICK on "SHARE SCREEN" Click on "SLIDE SHOW" - 1<sup>st</sup> Slide of Debevc/Lipsenj – Diane's trip

>Here, on my cousin's visit to Lipsenj, Diane was shown inside the Debevc house & was pointed to where they hid the "resistance". As I instead said, they hid the partisans, she said – "Pat, I didn't say partisans, I said they hid the "resistance people" – there were two resisters! " Later, I found partisan references to the Debevc family of Lipsenj. A Partisan Courier List includes Debevc's from Lipsenj.

And,

a partisan story – a family of Podcerkev says: "Vinko Hace after finishing school taught by a blacksmith at Debevc's in Stari trg, occasionally joined the smugglers. When the war broke out, he & his cousin joined the initial resistance against the occupier. The Italians burned down the house his mother was living in Aug '42 because her son was a partisan. She fled to different locations, one was Debevc's at Lipsenj ..."

Were the Debevc's partisans or neutral, assisting the partisans? We may never know but we can imagine the fear they experienced then.

## II. WWII leaders

[Click down](#) [#2 -Maps of Yugoslavia and Dynasty]

Now, some history.

Prior to WWII, Slovenia, in the upper left corner, was a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was ruled by the Serbian Karad~~o~~r~~o~~devic [Karageorgevich]dynasty. They had political factions, but banned the Communist Party. On April 6th'41, Germany invaded the Balkans. The dynasty set up a "government in exile" in London.

[Click down](#)—[#3 - Mihailovic & Tito]

And, TWO Resistance Groups formed.

- one led by Draža Mihailović – who the monarchy promoted to general. He led a Serb-dominated Četnik resistance with a vision of a Serbian state.

- And the other led by Josip Broz Tito, leader of the communist underground group arose as the Communist Partisans, the OF- Liberation Front resistance. Their tactics raised noble national sentiments.

At the start, Mihailović Četniks engaged in guerrilla warfare alongside Tito's Partisans against the German forces. They soon broke up from opposing strategies, ideology & distrust & embroiled in a bloody civil war. Battles began all over the country between Yugoslavs who hoped to restore the prewar kingdom & those who aimed to replace it with a communist state. Each side planned to be in power following the war.

And the two groups had different tactics -

- Mihailović concluded guerrilla attacks weren't worth the reprisals. "The German policy: for every German soldier killed, 100 Serb civilians would be shot, & so on. As that happened, the Chetnik policy was to wait for the Allies to return to Yugoslavia before engaging in a general uprising.

- Tito's Liberation Front first developed in the Italian occupation zone & by Sept '41, declared it was the only "authorized" resistance, traitors were to be sentenced to death. They were better organized in underground activities & more willing to accept the reprisals committed against innocent civilians.

And the Allies sentiments –

The British wanted them to engage in maximum violence against the Axis to tie down the German & Italian forces. The intense Serb nationalism of the Chetniks alarmed London & Washington. They thought more stable if ruled by Communist Tito. As frustrations over Mihailović's inaction & troubled by reports of the Chetniks collaborating with the Germans, they shifted their support to Tito in '44 as the Partisans did more of the fighting against the occupiers.

Just a couple days ago I tripped upon the Utube: Draza Mihailovich *Documentary (English - 2016)*, which I found very interesting...

### III. Slovenia's Ljubljana province>

[Click down](#) [#4- Map of Ljubljana Province]

Now to Slovenia, the Ljubljana Province- the region of Chuck, Joe & my family. The Province of Ljubljana has the vertical lines. Here, 80 % of the civil war occurred where many resisted the communist OF.

The people, especially peasants, suffered both Italian & partisan attacks on their lives & property. Partisans stayed in a village for a few weeks, confiscated food & property in return for "freedom loan" certificates promising the return of property after liberation. When the Italians located the partisans, the partisans fled & the Army punished the villagers. This cycle repeated.

The Partisans seemed to offer the best chance of defeating the occupiers & someday building a more democratic Yugoslavia. Many who never considered themselves leftists or socialists were led to enlist with the Partisans. And when their propaganda didn't get desired results, they threatened, burned houses, & killed. Many partisans weren't local, likely made it easier for them to do what they did as it didn't affect their families. Also, many joined & disillusioned, deserted.

[> Click down](#) [#5 – Leaders of Slovenes]

And, these are the leaders of the Slovenes at that time.

Leon Rupnik, a previous general in the Royal Yugoslav army, was sent to Ljubljana to work & by '43 was its president. He helped organized the Slovene Home Guard & was commander of units in the militia, & collaborated with the Fascist Italian & Nazi German occupation forces.

Gregorij Rožman was bishop of the diocese of Ljubljana. He rejected the OF & partisans outright. There arose the need for the anti-communist Slovenians to organize to protect families from the partisans brutal requisitioning of property & violence upon them. The Home Guard/domobranci was founded with German backing in order to protect themselves from the OF partisans.

And Matija Škerbec, a priest & member of the Slovene People's Party, in '43 helped finance the White Guard in Upper Carniola.

This divided families. Many families lived in fear, be it the Germans, Italians or partisans knocking at their doors. They could be punished for assisting the partisans, or could be punished by the partisans for not receiving support. Many remained neutral.

This civil war resulted in many villages burned down & destroyed, & killing fields throughout Slovenia – not of Germans, but of their own blood.

[Click down](#) [#6 – Slovenian National Army Retreat]

In Defeat,

May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the SNV (Slovenian National Army) under General Krenner led his troops' retreat to Carinthia, negotiated a surrender to the British command, & were assured protection, to be later interned in Italy. Disarmed, they marched with civilian refugees to camps in Viktring, separated

from the Germans as requested. The last week in May they boarded trains expecting to head west to the camps in Italy, but the trains soon went east through the tunnel at Jesenice into the hands of Tito's army. The first one who escaped & returned mid-week wasn't believed, so transports continued through the 31<sup>st</sup> then finally stopped – in total, 11,100 went to their deaths - betrayed by the British!

Following the War -

The Communist Party was the de facto political entity, & they quickly killed, & carefully & consistently buried large numbers those accused of collaboration. Fifty years passed before such travesties ever came to light.

The English didn't acknowledge their betrayal. Tito's new government silenced all. Unlike the Holocaust, this was like it didn't happen.

Those who survived couldn't return without fear of retribution. An exodus began of the anti-communist Slovenians abroad to the U.S., Canada, South America & Australia.

#### IV. Stanko Debevec & Frank Petrich

> Click down [#7-Debevc-Lipsenj, Cerknica]

This is my Debevc family. My grandpa Anton top right, his mother on his left with her granddaughter, & below his brother Jozef & wife Marija. And the Debevc house – only the left section is the Debevc house-the abutment to it on right is another family]

> Click down [#8 - Stanko Debevc]

>This is Stanko & a map showing from his home in Lipsenj to where his life ended in Stari Trg.

Stanko's mother's family lived close by in Dane. Stanko, 22 yrs old, was killed on Aug 1<sup>st</sup> '42, in Stari trg pri Lozu by the Italian army. Joe Petrich's uncle Tone, now 92 yrs, lived in Lipsenj then, 13 yrs old. He said, "An Italian patrol surrounded the village of Stari trg, July 29, '42. It was in retaliation of an attack on them by the partisans one week earlier. Stanko was just neutral & had been helping temporarily a family in the village of Klance, close to Dane & Stari trg, he was randomly shot. The Italians said they would kill 6 for each one of theirs killed by the partisans."

also supports his story -

In Dane, on July 31, 1942, is the village where 5 Slovenian civilian hostages were killed & photographed by Italian soldiers.

Click down [#9 -Frank Petrich story]

And then what happened to Joe's father Frank?

This is the Jakob Petrich family in 1936 in Lipsenj

Jakob & Amalija are sitting in the front.

Joe Petrich's Grandpa Jakob, my Grandma's youngest brother, had emigrated to the states but returned to Lipsenj in 1922 to farm where he raised his family.

Jakob's son Frank is in the back on the far right & Tone in front of him, next to Jakob

Frank & his family experienced the war around the same day as Stanko Debevc, yet in a very different way.

FRANK, 21 yrs old, was taken at gun point at his home in Lipsenj & sent to Rab, a concentration camp on the Italian-occupied island of *Rab*.

And these are photos of Frank at that time- one where he is on the ship *Saturnia*. He arrived back to the US in July 1947.

Joe said his Dad was taken by the Italian army in Lipsenj at gunpoint around his 21st birthday around July or August, 1942 [ his birthday July 29<sup>th</sup>]. He was sent to Rab, was there for 3 mos and then sent to Renichi concentration camp & was released around August 1943 when the Germans took over Italy & remained there in hiding living with an Italian family who took him in until the war ended, & as he was a U.S. citizen, he received a passport, returned to the U. S. in '47 & raised his family in Chicago. Tone, Frank's younger brother 13, was not at home when this happened. He said that they took the young men so to prevent them from joining the partisans.

Click on "Leave Slide "

Now Joe will share his dad's concentration camp experience and a little about his mom as well.

And, Chuck Debevc will follow him with his events of Grahovo Teharje, and effects of WWII on his family.

Joe...