A Two-way Road

In 1991, Luka and ten of his comrades were captured near Knin, a Croatian town held by rebel Serbs and the Yugoslav Federal Army. Luka spent a few months in the Knin jail. The first days he was left without food or water. He kept refusing to submit himself to the guards, so they would often take him to the top floor and beat him until he would pass out. Afterwards, they would drag him down, his head banging against the stairs, throw him naked into a solitary cell and leave him there for the night. In the morning, they would throw him back to his comrades, half-conscious. He would lie there before other men, covered with bruises and boot marks, completely helpless, broken, barely breathing. Each time his comrades would carefully spray his face with water and wipe blood off his lips, sure that this time he would die. But, each time Luka returned to life. He would look like a zombie and repeat deliriously over and over again that he had done nothing wrong, stolen nothing, and killed no one, just fought for his country. Everybody wondered what gave him the will to live. Did he think of anything else but his homeland? “Don’t resist them any more”, they kept telling him, “if they do this to you one more time, you won’t survive.” But, a week after the last beating, the guards would take him away again, and he would return from the dead again.

Soon everyone from the jail cell got gastroenteritis, and the prison doctor sent them, Luka too, to the Knin city hospital, partially turned into a prison hospital. The patients from his room said that he did not receive any medical attention for full two weeks, that he was not checked on morning rounds, and that food would just be thrown on his bed. He was saved by a sudden exchange of war prisoners. My medical team covered the exchange. We carried thin and broken, barely breathing. Each time his comrades would drag him down, his head banging against the stairs, throw him naked into a solitary cell and leave him there for the night. In the morning, they would throw him back to his comrades, half-conscious. He would lie there before other men, covered with bruises and boot marks, completely helpless, broken, barely breathing. Each time his comrades would carefully spray his face with water and wipe blood off his lips, sure that this time he would die. But, each time Luka returned to life. He would look like a zombie and repeat deliriously over and over again that he had done nothing wrong, stolen nothing, and killed no one, just fought for his country. Everybody wondered what gave him the will to live. Did he think of anything else but his homeland? “Don’t resist them any more”, they kept telling him, “if they do this to you one more time, you won’t survive.” But, a week after the last beating, the guards would take him away again, and he would return from the dead again.

When we finally came to the ward, we put him into a warm bath, started an infusion of glucose warmed up to room temperature, and gave him warm tea. As we did all this under improvised conditions, I didn’t incise the blisters but just bandaged them with perfect recall of all the details, despite the obvious stress, it was clear that he was ready to return to the front and fight. Luka survived all this and returned to the regiment. They tried to keep him behind a desk, doing paperwork, but he only wanted to go back to the Knin battlefront. The commander tried to keep Luka out of combat, at least for a while, by assigning him to our medical unit as an ambulance driver. We got along perfectly, but it was obvious that he longed for some real action. Although visibly weakened, Luka behaved as if he had been completely healthy and soon returned to his own infantry platoon.
sterile gauze. For the blisters that had already burst, I chose a conservative debridment with saline. It was important to immobilize the leg and put it into a position of moderate elevation. We constructed some kind of wire net above the elevated legs and then put covers over it, so they would not press on the wounds. Expecting that he would start feeling pain after the initial warming, I administered analgesics and a mild sedative. Luka fell asleep with a calm and peaceful expression on his face. As I changed the infusion bottle, I worried about a possible damage to the renal function due to his long exposure to the cold. Although the clinical picture mostly reflected the first-degree frostbites, large destructive changes of the second degree on his legs indicated the possibility of increased protein catabolism. Furthermore, after the restitution of circulation, there was a possibility of infection by contamination of the blisters on the ankle. The next day, we took Luka to the nearest hospital.

As we were driving over the bumpy road, I analyzed what led to the hypothermia. His health was poor after the many injuries he had sustained. He was skinny and anemic, but he had to endure all the hardships as the rest of us. Besides, the air pressure was lower on his reconnaissance spot high up in the mountain. His old synthetic uniform was not warm enough, and his too tight boots hampered normal circulation. His right leg was especially compromised because of the old injury to the peroneal nerve and popliteal artery. All this contributed to blood vessel spasm, disturbance of tissue liquids, hypovolemia, and hypoxia. Regardless of his enormous mental strength, his body could not endure the cold and physical exhaustion.

After a long recovery in the hospital, Luka joined our unit again and accompanied us in the 1995 “Storm” operation to liberate the occupied parts of Croatia. “This is the last time,” he said. He was on the verge of death, knocking at the gates of fate, and still it was not enough for him. Only a return to Knin, the city he left as a walking corpse, would make him feel free again. There was no anger in him, no hate, just elation. And there was no use in persuading him against his decision. When my team entered Knin, I met Luka in front of the army barracks, sitting at the entrance of his former jail. He bragged that he only sprained the ankle of his right foot, the one most severely damaged in his previous injury. He said he would bring his daughter here to this place, every fifth of August, and that he would teach her that one can travel each road both ways. You can return the same route you left – it is only the question of how much you are ready to sacrifice.

For a long time, not only in the war but also before, while worked in the emergency room, I thought I knew how easy a man can die. I saw it, more than once. But Luka showed me that it was not easy to die, too. I still meet him at my dermatology office – the frostbites left chronic infection of the skin and dermatomycosis on his feet. He is a lawyer today and he made a brilliant academic career. And me, after so many years of my academic life, I still cannot prove to myself that every road I have taken was a two-way road.

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