



**My father  
marched to the  
Russian front  
with a gun, but  
returned home  
with a Bible.**

# **FAR AWAY FROM HOME**

JOSIP KAVUR with CLIVE NASH

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Proudly published and printed in Australia by  
Signs Publishing  
Warburton, Victoria.

This book was  
Edited by Bruce Manners and Lauren Webb  
Proofread by Lauren Webb and Nathan Brown  
Cover design by Shane Winfield

Cover images and internal pictures supplied by the author  
Typeset in Berkeley Book 11/14.5

ISBN (print edition) 978 1 922373 08 3

ISBN (ebook edition) 978 1 922373 09 0

# Note to the reader

My father, Mirko Kavur (pronounced “Cavour”), was a Yugoslavian drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army as an 18-year-old in 1915. It was the beginning of World War I and was also the beginning of a grand adventure with God.

After the war, he and his young bride, Micika, became self-supporting missionaries to Macedonia. They struggled to survive in a foreign land and its harsh environment, with a growing family.

My father’s first wife died in Macedonia and my father then married Marija—my mother—and continued to serve as a missionary. He worked in Macedonia for almost 20 years, until World War II broke out. By this time, his family had grown to eight living children—three girls and five boys. I am the youngest.

With the coming of the war, my father was forced to return to his homeland with his family, where we settled in Zagreb in 1941. After World War II, Communism and religious suppression came to Yugoslavia. Despite many struggles and difficult experiences, God protected our family. Some of us escaped the oppression to greater freedoms far away from home.

The story begins in what is now Croatia and Macedonia but takes family members to other parts of Europe and Australia. This is my family’s story, but it is also God’s story—the story of how God took care of us through His providence, as we tried to remain faithful to Him no matter the cost.

**Josip Kavur**



Map of Yugoslavia (light grey) and surrounding nations at the end of World War II.

# Chapter 1

## World War II comes to our house

**L**was a bitterly cold day in 1943. Snow was on the ground around our home in Dubrava, a suburb in the city of Zagreb, and the chilly air sent shivers through my little four-year-old body. I had been playing outside and, when I looked toward our house, I saw a row of German army trucks lining one side of the road in perfect order. Camouflaged tarpaulins covered them.

Running back home and into the house, I shouted, “Mama, have you seen what’s happening on the street outside?”

“Yes,” she said.

“The Germans arrived in Zagreb last night,” Tata added nervously.

Both of them were busy shifting furniture. When I asked what was happening, Mama explained, “We have to make a sleeping place for some of the German soldiers, by order of the local council.”

I was excited to see real soldiers in my own home. My family was large, with eight children plus Mama and Tata, and we had to vacate one room in our house for two German soldiers. The soldiers occupied a downstairs room and we squeezed into the upstairs rooms. Tata had given us instruction not to talk to our visitors, but we formed an instant friendship with Huns and Rudolf because they were friendly to us. Huns pulled out his pocket wallet and showed us photos of his family: his mother, father and a sister much younger than him.

Tata and Mama started to be interested in what we were talking about. Tata conversed with Huns in the German he had learned during World War I when serving in the Austro-Hungarian army as a machine-gun operator against the Russians. Huns and Rudolf were young, only in their 20s, and filled with uncertainty about the war awaiting them. They were only with us a few days before they and the trucks left our road.

The winter of 1943 was particularly cold and we could hardly find enough wood for heating and cooking. Tata worked for a German



company called Viaduct. By trade he was a spray painter and upholsterer, and his work during World War II was to help fix army trucks. He had been given permission not to work on the Sabbath because he was a Seventh-day Adventist.

The management of the company gave him a house, one that was specially built for workers with large families, in what was called a workers' village. It was actually a gift from the government under Ante Pavelic, the leader of the Independent State of Croatia, a puppet state of Nazi Germany.



The Kavur family in front of their home in Zagreb. Josip is seated at the front left.

Most of the time, it was difficult to find enough food for the family. Tata often visited church members in nearby Granasine, which was a country area. There, the farmers were able to sell him some food, so we were able to survive. One day, Tata brought home what he thought was cooking oil and, for first time in a long time, we were able to cook our food with oil. But it turned out to be refined motor oil and we all ended up with dysentery. Following this, Tata was more careful about what he bought for our table from other people.

I'm the youngest in my family. My oldest half-brother, Zlatko, was 22 years old at the time and was not with us at our home in Dubrava because he had been drafted into the Domobrani—the Home Defence army. It had been established to protect the Croatian population but was under the command of the occupying German army.

The eastern front line was moving closer to our home in Zagreb and the war was taking a toll on all of us. Not only were food and fuel hard to come by, but there were also air raids. Things were changing every day. One morning, we heard from our neighbour that the Russian army was advancing toward Hungary. We were more afraid of them than of the

occupying German army because the Russians were not a disciplined army. One rumour we heard told of how a Russian soldier carrying a machine gun over his shoulder came to a small town and asked a passer-by, “What is the time, bratkov [brother]?”

The man stopped, looked at his watch and said, “Noon.”

The soldier rolled up his sleeve, and there were half a dozen watches strapped to his arm. “It is the correct time, Comrade. Give me your watch.” And he added the watch to his collection.

He walked to the marketplace, saw a man sweeping the road, stopped momentarily and asked, “What is the time, bratkov?”

The man stopped sweeping, looked at the soldier with the machine gun, then, holding his broom straight up, he looked at the shadow the broom made on the pavement and said, “12.30, bratkov.”

The soldier checked the time on his watches and exclaimed, “That’s the correct time! Give me your watch, bratkov.” He grabbed his broom and took it with him. We never did find out if the story was true.

Soon spring arrived, the snow melted away and finally the cold of winter was gone. Flowers began to appear all over the fields in full display. There were blooming saffron flowers among the green grass—some were white, others blue and purple. Then there were pussy willows and blossoming fruit trees: cherries, apples, plums, apricots and peaches.

One morning, I ran outside after breakfast. The warmer weather was welcome after such a cold winter—as were the longer days. I felt the gentle breeze through my hair. Then I remembered my little sailing boat. Running back into the house, I shouted, “Mama! Mama!”

I ran into the kitchen where I found her cooking something on the stove. I tugged at her apron. “Mama, can I take my little sailing boat to the pond?” The pond was not far away from our home. I looked into her loving blue eyes and asked again, “Please, Mama, can I go? Please?”

Mama agreed, but with one condition: “Josip, if you hear the warning siren, run straight home.”

I was terrified of the dreadful sound of the sirens, because they were usually followed by the loud explosions of bombs. I agreed.

I picked up my sailing boat and quickly ran outside before Mama could change her mind. It was nice to be walking barefoot on the grass. I



could feel the coolness of the ground as I skipped along the narrow pathway that led to the pond near the main road into Dubrava. It took only a few minutes to reach it.

I was happy to be at the pond. I put my sailing boat on the water, carefully adjusted the sails, and gave it a little push toward the other side of the pond. The gentle breeze filled its sails and carried it across the water. I ran around the pond to meet my boat. But half-way around, I was stopped by the sudden sound of the air-raid sirens, which shattered the morning quiet.

Momentarily, I was frozen with fear. Then, remembering what Mama had said, I started to run back home. Driven by fear, I ran as fast as any four-year-old boy could run, knowing what usually followed the sirens. I only had a few minutes to reach our bomb shelter—a place of safety.

Half-way home and in an open grassy field, I heard the roar of aeroplane engines. I looked up and could see, directly above me, three small fighter planes flying very low. They were so close and so low that I could see the pilots in the cockpits. Then there was rapid machine gun fire. I thought they were aiming at me. All I could think was that they were going to kill me and, in an instant, I threw myself into a small ditch. I lay there, motionless, as if I were pinned to the ground.

Suddenly, the sirens sounded again, signalling that it was all over. The attack had ended. I jumped to my feet and ran the rest of the way home.

Mama was at the front gate and caught me with open arms saying, “Joza, look at your face—it is so pale. You look so scared. Come with me into the kitchen and I will give you something nice to drink.”

Mama explained what had happened: “You saw the planes, but they weren’t shooting at you. They were shooting at the train station. Maybe the German army is transporting something very important and that’s why the planes attacked the railway station.”

The railway station was not far from our home. Also nearby was a small aerodrome where army pilots were trained to fly and parachute. We often heard the aeroplane engines roar during take-off. One day, we were outside our home watching the aeroplanes flying above us and men parachuting out of them. But something went wrong with one of the planes. One of the parachutes got hooked behind the pilot’s cockpit, and

the parachutist was dangling on the tail of the plane. It was a fearful sight.

The pilot tried to free the parachute. He couldn't steer the plane because the parachute had jammed the rudder, so both the pilot and the parachutist were in danger. We were amazed to see the pilot climb out of his cockpit and crawl along the fuselage toward the parachutist to try to free him. Then we were horrified to see the pilot fall from the plane and plummet to the ground.

Later, our neighbour, who worked in a government office, told us what happened next. The parachutist could not free himself and was stuck hanging on the tail of the plane until it ran out of fuel and crashed near the Sava River, which flows near Zagreb.

\* \* \*

When we sat around our large kitchen table, Tata sat at one end and Mama at the other. As the youngest in the family, my place was next to Mama. On one side of the table sat my brothers: Mire, 14 years old; Miso, 12 years old; and next to him Ivica, 11 years old. On the other side of the table sat my three sisters: the oldest, 21-year-old Nada; then my 18-year-old sister, Ljuba; and next to her, 17-year-old Vera. My oldest brother, 22-year-old Zlatko, was rarely able to come home, despite being stationed with the Domobrani not far away.

Because of the war, we had to darken the windows of our house with blankets at night so no light could be seen from outside our home. After our evening meal and worship, we expected a story from Tata. We enjoyed hearing him tell of his experiences during World War I—the Great War—when he was a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army, fighting against the Russians.

Although we had heard his stories from the war before, we liked to stay up as late as possible and we loved hearing our father recall the time when, as an 18-year-old, he was drafted into the army:

I was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army, late in the autumn of 1915. [That's how he always began.] I was part of the Croatian forces, in the 16th Regiment, and we were stationed in a place called Bjelovar

[about 80 kilometres (50 miles) east of Zagreb]. I spent several months there training as a machine-gun operator, and afterwards was transferred to the 53rd Regiment, stationed in Zagreb. After three months, we started marching to Budapest, where we would join the Hungarian forces before making our way to the Russian front.

When we arrived in Budapest, we settled in to the army barracks and some of us were given a pass to go to the city square. I walked with a group of about 11 comrades. Budapest was a nice city and we enjoyed looking at the old buildings. We were happy to be out of the army barracks, and we went to the market square. When I looked over the crowded marketplace, I noticed a nicely dressed young Hungarian woman. She wore a colourful dress and was selling sweets on a tray hanging by a strap around her neck.

I turned to my comrades and asked them to wait for me. I wanted to buy some sweets. They stopped and waited. I walked over to her, offering her some money and pointing to the sweets I wanted to buy.

We Croatian soldiers wore an army uniform with a national flag ribbon stretched across our chest with three colours—red, white and blue—to identify our nationality. Surprisingly and without warning, she grabbed my national emblem, tore it off my uniform and threw it to the ground. It happened so fast I was taken aback.

Without thinking, I hit the tray of sweets she had in front of her and they scattered all over the marketplace. Then she started to scream something in Hungarian.

I looked around the market square. On the other side was a group of Hungarian soldiers who started to come toward me. My buddies saw what had happened and they joined me. It was a tense situation, but fortunately none of us were carrying guns. Who knows what would have happened if we had been? We were ready for a fight, when an officer appeared and ordered both groups of soldiers to return to their barracks.

We were two different nationalities, heading to the same front line and facing the same enemy in the Russians, yet we didn't like each other. I had to wonder what kind of army we would make.

The following day, our regiment was given combat equipment with ammunition. Then we boarded a train at Budapest Railway Station. It was a long train, with the first half carrying Croatian soldiers and the other half carrying Hungarian soldiers. I was in a carriage close to the locomotive and seated near a window. After we were all aboard, the steam engine began to slowly chug forward, then picked up speed as we headed toward the Russian front. I wondered what it would be like. It was a pleasant autumn day as we moved through the countryside. The houses went by in a stream of movement, with the constant click-clack sound of the carriages on the track. It seemed like we were in a river that carried us along in its flow.

Then, suddenly, I could hear someone yelling abuse above the noise of train carriages. Then a gun was fired. Someone had decided to start a war on the train—and every soldier had a gun and ammunition! It didn't take long before the battle intensified and more gunshots rang through the air. Several bullets flew above my head, just missing me. I lay low to avoid being killed.

This shooting happened every time the train went around a bend in the line, when the soldiers could see the carriages in front of them or behind them. As soon as the carriages straightened up, the gunfire stopped. Then again, as we were taking another bend on the railway tracks, the battle resumed. I wondered if I would make it to the front line or be killed on the train.

The gun battle ended when, as the train straightened on the tracks, someone uncoupled the train in the middle and separated the two fighting parties. The Hungarian soldiers were stranded on the tracks and the gun battle ended.

After we arrived at our camp, the Croatian soldiers got off and the locomotive was sent back to get the Hungarian soldiers in the stranded carriages. The next day everyone had cooled off and we continued on to the front line.

Tata finished the story, but now it was late. "Off to bed, children," he concluded. "But don't forget where I've stopped the story. I'll continue it next time."

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