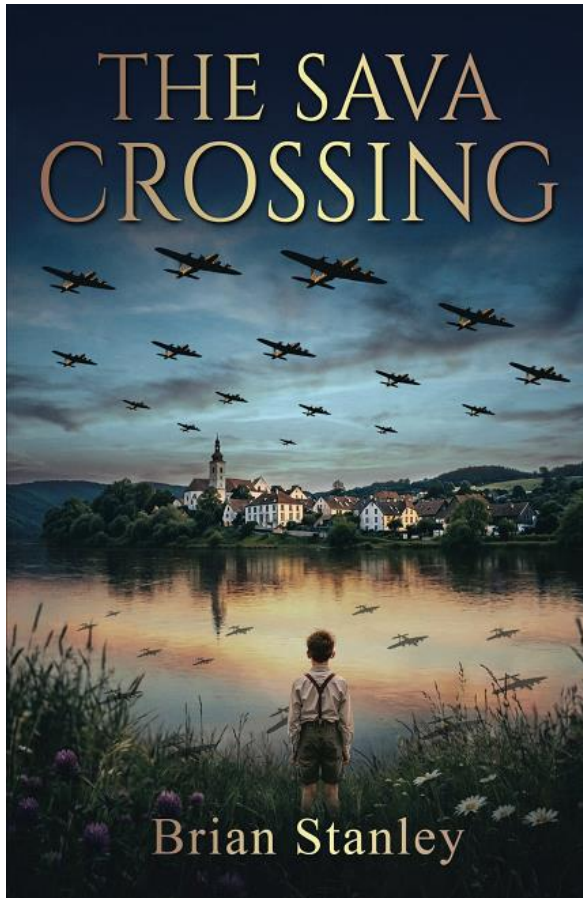




Croatia, 1941. The Stanica family is torn apart by the Nazi occupation — a father conscripted, a mother taken, a son left to find his own way through a country that no longer exists. A novel about war, family, and the long road home.

The Sava Crossing
By Brian Stanley

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THE SAVA CROSSING



Brian Stanley

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1 | The Boys

Krapje, Croatia — April 1941

Morning light pooled on the Goldsteins' porch like something poured from a jar. Dee Stanica sat cross-legged in the warmth of it, knife in hand, putting the final touches on his best friend's spinning top. Beside him, Jakob Goldstein hunched over his sketchbook, his charcoal stick moving in quick, confident strokes across the page. Through the kitchen window behind them, Dee could see Mr. Goldstein at the table, reading glasses low on his nose, a letter open before him, a full cup of coffee at his elbow.

"Stop moving your jaw when you concentrate," Jakob said without looking up. "I'm trying to get your chin right."

"My jaw doesn't move."

Jakob kept sketching. "It does. Like a goat chewing."

Dee threw a wood shaving at him. It landed in Jakob's dark hair and stuck there like a tiny feather. Jakob didn't notice, or pretended not to. He was two years younger than Dee but had the focus of someone twice his age when a sketchbook was open. He could draw anything; he'd once sketched the Sava River at sunset in the time it took Dee to rig his pole and get a line in the water.

From inside the farmhouse came the smell of Mrs. Goldstein's bread, warm and dense with caraway. Little Rivka appeared in the doorway clutching her rag doll by one arm, its button eyes dangling from loose threads.

"Jakob, Mama says come set the table."

"Tell Mama I'm immortalizing Dee's goat face for future generations."

Rivka considered this. She was six and took most things seriously. “I’ll tell her you said no.” She padded back inside, the doll dragging behind her.

Dee blew the dust from the last star point and held the top up to the light, turning it slowly. The oak was sanded smooth as silk, the ring of tiny stars finally even around its widest point. He’d carved the top for Jakob’s twelfth birthday that winter but hadn’t been satisfied, one star had always been slightly longer than the others. He’d been working it ever since. Now it was right.

“Done.” He held it out.

Jakob took it, ran his thumb along the groove he’d already worn into the wood from months of practice, and grinned. “About time.” He positioned it between his thumb and forefinger and gave it a precise, sharp twist. The top hit the porch boards spinning, the stars blurring into a single bright band. It held, wobbled, held again — then tipped.

“It’s all in the wrist.” Jakob demonstrated the motion in the air, a quick snap at the release. “You still flick too early. Follow through.” He handed the top back to Dee.

Dee tried. The top spun crooked and toppled almost immediately. Jakob scooped it up and pocketed it.

“Your hands are too big for it now,” Jakob said. “I’ll teach you better next time. When your fingers stop growing and decide what size they want to be.”

“You carve the tops. I draw the portraits.” Jakob held up the sketchbook. Dee’s likeness stared back, catching the set of his jaw and the way his hair fell across his forehead.

“That’s actually good,” Dee admitted.

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’ve been drawing your ugly face for years.” Jakob tore the page free and tucked it inside the sketchbook’s back cover, already thick with similar pages, the Sava at sunset, their

fathers in the river, Rivka asleep with her doll, a wolf Jakob swore he'd seen near the old castle.

Dee folded the knife closed and slid it into his pocket. "My father says the trout are running at the big bend. After my party, we should ride out. Camp overnight. Fish till dawn."

"I promised Rivka I'd teach her. She could come."

Dee looked up from the knife. "Rivka can barely hold a fork."

"She's tougher than she looks. She bit Goran Babić at school last week. Drew blood."

Dee laughed. Through the kitchen window, he could see Mrs. Goldstein at the counter, her hands flour-dusted, pulling a loaf from the oven with the same quiet precision she brought to everything. She set it on the rack to cool and began humming something he didn't recognize, a melody that seemed to come from somewhere far away. David was still at the table. The letter was folded now, tucked beneath his hand. He had the same look Dee's father had worn at breakfast that morning — the weary heaviness that had settled over every grown-up that spring — a stillness around the eyes that didn't match the rest of the face.

David removed his glasses and came to the screen door. "Jakob. Inside, please."

Something in his tone made both boys look up.

"You too, Dee. Come have some bread before you go."

Inside, the kitchen was warm with the smell of fresh bread. Rivka was already at the table, carefully tearing a piece into smaller pieces and feeding them to her doll.

David poured two glasses of milk and set them down. He watched the boys eat for some time, then sat across from them.

"Happy birthday, Deesl. Fourteen," he said, shaking his head. "I remember when you two couldn't reach this table without a cushion."

Dee smiled through a mouthful of bread.

For a while, David said nothing, his fingers worrying the corner of the folded letter. When he spoke again, “Dee, your father is expecting you for the picnic. You should head home soon.” His voice was easy.

“You’re not coming? He invited you. He said—”

“The trout are biting better downstream,” David said. “Tell Yedi we’ll see him for your birthday dinner tonight. And tell Bridgette to save us some of that baklava.”

Dee nodded. His father and mother would be waiting.

He glanced at his wife. She had stopped humming.

“Jakob, see Dee off, then help your mother clear up.”

Dee drained his milk, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and stood.

“See you tonight.”

Jakob walked him off the porch. The morning was still bright. Bees worked the clover along the fence. Somewhere downriver, a church bell marked the hour.

He started down the path toward home. The grass was still wet around his boots. Behind him, he heard Rivka’s voice through the kitchen window: “Jakob, you have wood in your hair.” And Jakob’s laugh, bright and carrying across the yard.

The path came out of the trees near the barn, and from there the land sloped down through the meadow to the river. The Great Oak was already visible on the bank below, their picnic quilt a bright square of color on the grass beneath it.

He couldn’t wait to get a line in the water. He broke into a jog down the slope. He was already halfway down when something small and brown came scrambling up toward him, all legs and ears and wild, uncoordinated joy. The puppy hit his shins before he could kneel, then rolled onto her back in the grass, tail going so fast her whole body shook.

“Happy birthday, darling!” Mama called from the quilt.

Down by the oak, Gran watched from her usual spot, the satisfied look of someone whose surprise had landed perfectly. She raised an apple in salute.

“She’s a Labrador,” Gran called up. “I’ve been calling her Pika. She ate my slipper this morning. The left one. I’m choosing to see it as good taste in fashionable footwear.”

Dee scooped the puppy up. She licked his face, wriggling so hard he nearly dropped her. He laughed, the kind of laugh that starts deep and doesn’t stop, and ran the rest of the way down to the river with Pika squirming in his arms.

2 | The Family

Krapje, Croatia — April 1941

Cold water. Warm sun. The taste of sunflower seed salt on his tongue. Dee spat the shells into the Sava and watched them spiral past his fishing line. The turquoise river swelled against the banks while Pika yapped at dragonflies dancing above the water. Behind him on the quilt, Mama was laughing at something Gran said while his father studied his medical journal.

Gran sat on her log beneath the Great Oak that sheltered them all, her weathered hands peeling another apple with practiced strokes. She watched the ribbon of skin curl away from her knife.

“Pika’s first swimming lesson!” Dee announced from the grass worn smooth by years of family picnics at the Stanica farm, his voice cracking as he coaxed the puppy toward the water. Pika hesitated, then splashed into the shallows with a frantic dog-paddle. Dee laughed and waded in after her, the cold current swirling around his calves.

“She swims like you did when you were learning, darling,” Mama called from the threadbare quilt. “A great deal of motion and very little forward progress.”

Dee shot her a look over his shoulder. She grinned back, entirely pleased with herself.

His father grinned and set aside the journal. He waded into the river, trousers and all, and with a playful stumble, sent a wave of water splashing into Dee.

“Oh, that’s war, Tata!” Dee retaliated as they fell into a fit of splashing and laughter. Pika scrambled out of the spray and barked from the shore, dancing back and forth as if trying to referee.

“Boys, you’re scaring away the fish!” Mama warned, but she was laughing too. Dee caught her watching them with that look she got sometimes, the one that made her pull him into fierce hugs when he least expected it, holding on just a second too long.

“What fish?” Gran scoffed from her log, the old rope swing hanging motionless from the branch above her. “Yedi scared them all away years ago with his singing.”

“I guess we’ll be having tinned fish for dinner, Gran,” Mama said, still smiling.

“The fish love my singing,” Tata declared, clutching his chest dramatically before losing his footing on a slick river stone, stumbling backward with a great, theatrical splash. “Race you to shore,” Tata called, already churning toward the bank. “Loser cleans the fish we didn’t catch.”

Dee lunged after him. They hit the bank at the same time and Tata pulled him into a wet bear hug. Dee squirmed free, laughing. “Get off, Tata.” But he was grinning when he said it. They collapsed onto the quilt, both dripping and breathless.

Mama leaned forward and adjusted the small jar of wildflowers Tata had picked for her that morning, purple clover and white daisies, their weekly tradition.

“Shouldn’t the Goldsteins be here by now?” Mama murmured, glancing downriver.

“Mr. Goldstein said the trout are biting better downstream,” Dee said, pulling a sunflower seed from his pocket. “He told me to tell you to save him some baklava.”

Mama’s fingers paused on a wildflower petal. Something crossed her face — there and gone — before her eyes found Tata’s over the blooms. Dee couldn’t tell what passed between them.

“Still my favorite centerpiece,” she said.

Tata covered her hand with his. “I know,” he replied, his voice carrying that particular warmth he saved only for her.

Dee reached for the bowl of strawberries, the surprise Mama had been saving.

“*Erdbeeren*,” she corrected gently, tapping his hand before he could take one. “If you want to eat them, you must name them. In German, please.”

“*Erdbeeren*,” Dee repeated, then added with a sigh, “*Les fraises. Jagode*.” Three languages for one berry — her rule.

Next to the strawberries sat the birthday baklava. Mama had spent the morning making it, layer after delicate layer, using the last of their honey and walnuts. Since the military coup against the Axis pact last week, everyone had been hoarding food, expecting the worst. The markets had emptied within days.

He took a berry. It was precious, the first of the season from her garden. Each berry tasted impossibly sweet. The juice ran red down Dee’s chin. He wiped it away.

His mind went to the letter in Tata’s desk drawer, acceptance into the Academy of Science in Zagreb, a year early. “It’s a rare honor,” Tata had said, his voice thick with pride. Now Dee wondered if there would even be a school left to attend.

He thought of the breakfast conversation that morning, borders, German troops massing in the north, and the radio reports crackling from the old Philips each evening.

Mama reached to cut the baklava. "First piece is yours, Gran." But Gran had gone still, her head tilted like she was listening for something far off. Her apple knife stopped moving mid-peel. "Listen." Her voice cut through the afternoon. Tata's hand tightened over Mama's on the quilt.

Gran's face had changed, the expression of someone who had heard that sound before, in another lifetime, under different flags.

The earth shivered beneath them, like when the farm equipment crossed over the river bridge. Their fingers interlaced, wedding bands clicking softly together. The jar of wildflowers trembled, ripples spreading across its surface.

Then came the sound. Dee thought at first it was thunder. But the sky was clear. It rumbled closer—a mechanical grinding punctuated by the throb of heavy vehicles. Many vehicles. He had heard that sound in the newsreels at the cinema: tanks, trucks, military convoys.

Mama went pale.

Tata was already standing, shading his eyes eastward. He reached down and grabbed his medical bag. "The house." His voice came out steady, doctor-calm. "Now."

Dee stood frozen, staring at the horizon where dust clouds rose like smoke signals. "Tata? Is it them? The Germans?"

Tata knelt, gripping Dee's shoulders. "Yes. You know the plan. The Gaura."

Dee nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing.

They ran for the farmhouse. Pika's frightened yapping mixed with the rumble of approaching engines. As they reached the house, Dee glanced back. The baklava still sat on the blanket untouched. High above, dark shapes moved in formation against the blue sky, heading east toward Belgrade.

Pika scrambled over the threshold as Tata pulled Dee through the farmhouse door and slammed it behind them.

3 | The Family

The Farmhouse, Krapje — August 1943

The upstairs room smelled of varnish and pheasant feather.

Dee sat at his small desk, the brass jaws of the fly-tying vise gripping a Number 12 hook. Sunlight slanted through the window, catching dust above the pheasant feathers and spools of silk thread scattered across the wood. In the two years since the birthday picnic by the Sava, he had grown into his hands.

Some things had simply stopped: the visits from the Goldsteins, Gran's humming from below, the ease of a walk to the river without first checking the road. He carefully wound the olive thread around the hook shank, trapping the quill of a pheasant feather. He and Tata had taken the bird last autumn—Dee's first clean wing shot.

Wrap. Tension. Wrap.

It was a Brown Trout pattern Tata had taught him. "Patience, Dee," his father's voice echoed in his memory. "You have to trick the fish into believing it's real." Now, it was just a way to trick himself into believing the war hadn't taken everything.

Downstairs, the house was quiet. Too quiet. No radio. Gran rarely sang in the kitchen anymore; now she just sat at the table mending socks with quick, silent stitches. Only the soft whisper of thread on steel above her, where Dee worked his flies, and Pika lying in a patch of sun at his feet.

Pika's ears swiveled toward the window. A low, wet growl.

Dee paused, the thread still wrapped around his finger. Convoys on the main road were routine now. Two years of occupation had taught him to ignore them. But this sound wasn't fading. It was growing louder.

He crossed to the window in three strides.

They weren't passing. They were turning up the drive.

Sun flashed off the chrome of a black Horch convertible leading a convoy up the drive. A small swastika flag on its bumper whipped in the wind, a flash of red against the dust. Behind it, a Demag half-track rumbled, the stark blue U of the *Ustaše* flapping from its canvas. A Kübelwagen brought up the rear.

Three vehicles. An operation.

"Tata, Mama, soldiers are coming!" His voice, deeper now but still prone to cracking, carried down the stairs.

Yedi and Bridgette exchanged a single glance across the kitchen. Bridgette's pale skin drained further against her blonde hair. Yedi moved first, crossing through the living room to the screen door with Bridgette right behind him. Looking out, Yedi's breath caught. Not a patrol. Not a requisition squad. They had come for someone.

"Yedi, what do we do?" Bridgette whispered.

He shut the inner door. His hands were shaking.

His father's Romanian blood. It was in Dee too. That was all it would take.

He breathed. Four counts in. Hold. Four counts out.

He met her eyes. "We get Dee to the Gaura. Now."

Yedi's mind went to the shelter beneath the hay barn—the Gaura. His father had started the cellar after the Great War, a

soldier's certainty that the only safety was the kind you dug yourself. Gran knew it too, from the other side of that war—the Zeppelins over England, the waiting in the dark. They had all deepened it together in '36, every one of them, their initials carved into the beam. And Yedi had drilled the route with Dee until the boy could find it blindfolded.

“Get him there. Cover the entrance. I’ll stall them.” He held her hand for just a heartbeat. “Go, my love.”

Gran hadn’t moved from the kitchen table. Her needle was still, her eyes fixed on her son. She said nothing—but the set of her jaw was the same one Yedi remembered from every story she’d ever told about the last war.

As Bridgette flew up the stairs, Yedi turned toward the porch, steeling himself. From the floor above, he heard Pika’s frantic, high-pitched yapping, followed by Bridgette’s urgent voice. A door groaned open, then slammed shut. The yapping went muffled. Claws scratched against wood. A few seconds later, he heard their hurried footsteps descending the back stairs. He drew a breath and opened the door.

On the porch, four soldiers stood ready, a mix of *Wehrmacht* grey and *Ustaše* black. One young soldier wore a curved knife at his belt, the blade weathered.

“Gentlemen,” Yedi forced out, his voice catching on the word. He cleared his throat, tried again. “What... what can I do for you?”

The soldiers didn’t answer. They parted instead, making way.

Behind him, Gran's footsteps crossed the kitchen floor—quick, hard, deliberate. Before he could turn, she pushed past him.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Her face flushed, grey hair disheveled.

“Mother,” Yedi murmured, reaching for her arm—but she would not be restrained.

The remaining soldiers formed ranks around the vehicles. An SS-*Standartenführer* emerged from the Horch, tall and severe, his uniform impeccably tailored. His boots clicked on the gravel. He removed his leather gloves finger by finger. A single silver oak leaf on his collar tab, death's head on his cap. Against the car's obsidian paint, he looked almost bloodless.

“Ah, it is not what you can do for us, but what we can do for you, Herr Doktor.” His Croatian was flawless. His pale eyes moved across their faces, pausing at Gran's wedding ring, noting how she twisted it nervously. “Or should I restate that in your late father's native tongue—Romanian?”

Yedi pressed his hands flat against his thighs to hide their tremor.

The officer smiled.

“You seem surprised by my visit, Herr Doktor. You shouldn't be. We've been watching your family for some time.” He let that land. “You thrived at Bologna, Doctor. Your M.D., and then the surgical research that made your name before you buried it in the provinces.” He let the recitation hang, the faintest smile touching his lips. “The Reich does not overlook such men.”

Bologna. The fellowship. The laboratory. The research he'd abandoned. A life he'd left behind for a country practice and a village that needed him.

"And then there is your wife," the officer went on, his voice taking on something almost reverent. "Bridgette Robbins. An Oxford girl who came to Bologna for the languages, I believe—and stayed for you." A small pause. "The reports describe her as very fair." His eyes returned to Yedi's. "You brought her here and married in this very home." His eyes shifted to Gran. "And you must be Shirley Stanica. Married to Sonny Stanica until his heart condition took him in '39."

"And your son, little Deesl," the officer crooned, taking a single step closer, close enough that Yedi could smell the tobacco on his uniform. "His name an acronym formed from your siblings' names: Darel, Sherl, and Leev." The officer's head tilted slightly. "Your dear mother shortened Deesl to Dee—it sounded too German for her liking."

Gran drew a sharp breath.

His eyes held Yedi's, unblinking. "Tell me, Doctor, has he inherited your resilience?"

Yedi's mind raced. *Sherl lives in Berlin with her husband. Had they reached her too?*

"I don't understand," Yedi said through clenched teeth. "You said you're here to help?"

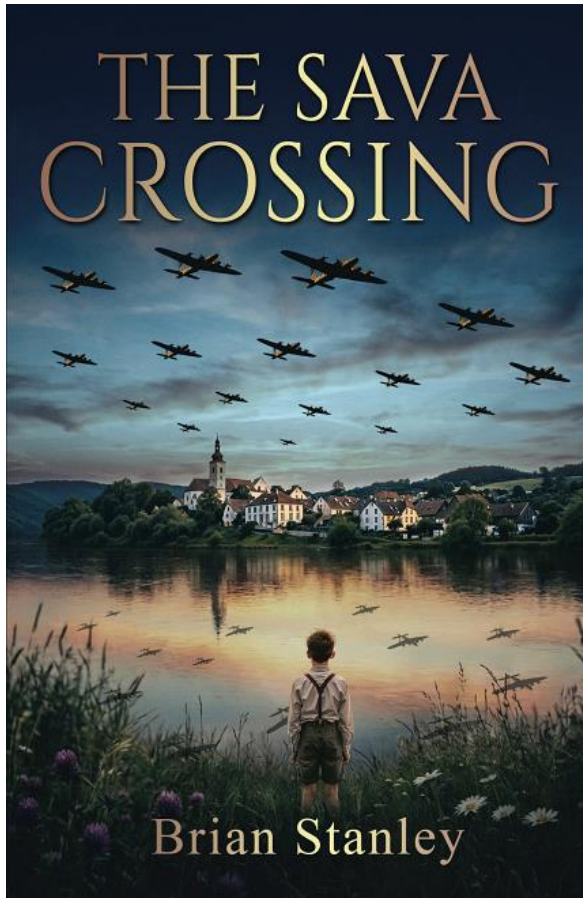
Gran's hands balled into fists. Yedi willed her to stay still.

The SS officer remained motionless. "Yes. There is a position for you, Doctor. One that will keep your family intact."

He took several steps forward. The wooden stair creaked under his weight. His shadow fell across their threshold, and even in the August heat it carried a chill.

“Shall we discuss it inside?”

Behind the officer, one soldier shifted his rifle.



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