

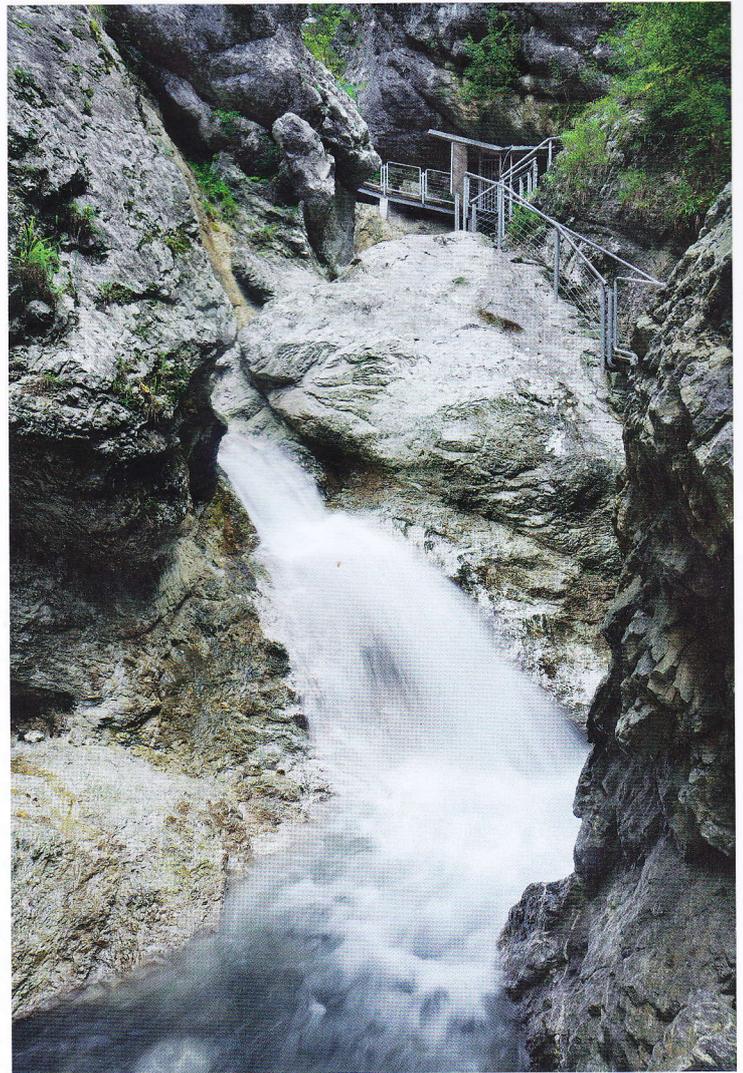
# The Password **Franja** Meant the Difference Between Life and Death

THE FRANJA PARTISAN HOSPITAL OPEN-AIR MUSEUM  
RECEIVES THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE LABEL



Text: **Maja Kutin** Photography: **Cerkno Museum archive (Rafael Marn, Luka Kalan)**

In May this year Europe celebrated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its liberation from Fascism and Nazism. The dark period of the Second World War did not spare Slovenia. It was caught up in the maelstrom of war when the Luftwaffe attacked Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941. Following the defeat of the Yugoslav army and the occupation of the country, a resistance movement began to be organised in Slovenia, which had been split between three occupying forces – the Germans, the Italians and the Hungarians. Within the partisan movement a medical service was created. This was responsible for the mobilisation of medical personnel and material, for providing medical training and for caring for the sick and wounded. By setting up clandestine hospitals in locations where access was difficult – in forests, ravines and caves – they were also able to tend to the seriously wounded and sick. The 120 partisan hospitals and the more than 15,000 wounded treated in them between 1942 and 1945 are a unique achievement of the Slovene partisan movement. One of the few surviving hospitals, still standing today as a witness to the heroic, self-sacrificing and humane struggle to save lives and resist the occupying forces, is the legendary Franja Partisan Hospital in the hidden Pasice gorge. This year the hospital received the European Heritage Label, which the European Commission awards to sites representing notable cultural heritage with symbolic value for Europe, an important role in European history or culture, or an important role in European integration.





After the capitulation of Italy and the subsequent German offensive, the partisans in northern Primorska and western Gorenjska needed a safe place for their wounded before winter set in. The location they chose was a narrow and almost inaccessible gorge called Pasice between high rocky overhangs in Dolenji Novaki near Cerkno. One by one, huts were built from wooden planks and the hospital grew gradually with continuous improvements. Today's visitors to Franja – this remarkable place of memory – can visit 14 huts of various sizes and functions and a handful of ancillary buildings and see the wards where the wounded were treated, the operating theatre, the X-ray room, the kitchen and the shelter. The hospital even had its own hydroelectric power plant. During the year and a half in which it was active – from December 1943 to early May 1945 – various doctors took turns running the hospital. But it was named after Dr Franja Bojc Bidovec, who led it for longest. As well as operating on the wounded and caring for them and the staff, it was necessary to supply everything that the hospital needed

in order to function, including a sufficient quantity of sanitary material, medicines and food. They even found time to organise cultural activities. The Franja hospital was the partisans' biggest secret and was, at the same time, the only hospital that had to look after its own security. In order to keep it secret, the partisans relied on conspiratorial methods. The wounded were first brought to one of a number of rendezvous, and only after they had been examined were they carried on stretchers, at night, up the stream to the main Franja hospital or one of its scattered outposts. In order to maintain the strict secrecy of the location, they were blindfolded and turned round and round a number of times so that they lost their sense of orientation. Access to the hospital was protected by a minefield and bunkers built in natural hollows in the rock. Enemy troops twice passed very close to the hospital but did not discover it.

The main unit of the Franja Partisan Hospital provided medical and surgical aid to 578 wounded and sick, while the number of wounded treated in all its units amounted to nearly 1,000. As well as the Slovenes and

members of the other Yugoslav nations, these included French, Russians, Polish, Americans, Italians and one Austrian. In wartime conditions of shortages and boundless inventiveness, the hospital's mortality rate was relatively low (13.5%).

Today visitors reach the Franja Partisan Hospital near Cerkno via a marked footpath running beside the stream. Although floods in the autumn of 2007 swept away most of the huts and many of the original items exhibited there, it was decided, in view of the enormous symbolic value of the Franja hospital complex, to completely rebuild it. Following a comprehensive reconstruction, the complex was reopened to visitors in 2010. The 14 wooden huts and ancillary buildings stand just as they did 70 years ago when the hospital ceased operating, but their message of resistance, nobility and comradeship is still very much alive and serves as a vivid exhortation to present and future generations to appreciate the peace and freedom that we now enjoy! The Franja Partisan Hospital has also been added to UNESCO's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites. •