

Martin Smallridge

The mills  
kept grinding

Martin Smallridge  
The mills kept grinding

©

Copy right by Martin Smallridge

Second Edition  
Lyrics Editorial House  
Portlaoise 2021  
Ireland

Cover design: Marcin Małek  
proofreading: Rachel Murray

Front cover image: Kamila Koziół, shutterstock 1344365390

*Imprint: Independently published*

ISBN: 9798471416192

The rights of Marcin Małek writing under the penname  
Martin Smallridge to be identified as the author of this work  
has been asserted by him under the Copyright and Other  
Intellectual Property Law Provisions Act 2019

Copyright © 2021 by Marcin Małek  
Copyright © 2021 by Lyrics Editorial House

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, distributed, or  
transmitted in any form or by any means, including  
photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical  
methods, without the prior written permission of the  
publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in  
critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses  
permitted by copyright law.



*In memory of those whose stories build this novel.*

*Heartfelt thanks to all my friends who'll find slivers of their  
fortunes between the pages of this book.*

*To my daughter, Maria Klara, and her peers, so that they  
understand and learn from this.*

## Table of contents

Author's Note.....	1
Mill wheels.....	9
Imaginary love.....	40
Flowers out of the tears.....	62
The journey.....	82
The Erl-King.....	107
As long as we're here.....	128
Solitary rock.....	163
The parade.....	185
A curse.....	212
Campo dei Fiori.....	251
The Retribution.....	293
Call of the wild.....	326
„Blut und Ehre”.....	362
The dance of the manes.....	410
Explanatory notes and comments.....	470

### **Author's Note**

Nowadays it has become customary to regard the written word as equal to revealed truth. Nothing more misleading. And who gets to be blamed? After all, we owe it to ourselves - the folk of the written word. For we are trying too hard wanting to reflect the tiniest shred of reality. And yet, a novel is above all an idea born inside the writer's head. A place that resembles our own but still evades a sober gaze, often evoking a smile of pity if not a grimace of disgust or whichever of these precious feelings I have purposely omitted. Although the world of my characters deceptively resembles that of our parents and grandparents' youth, is only a figment of imagination. Yes, we encounter real people in it, those who lived and influenced the course of historical events, that served as a setting for the novel's narrative, but as a whole, this big, cruel, and complicated reality is a dummy, a decoration, or rather a theatrical mask drawn over the face of a clichéd actor. No... there's no need to get all indignant. Everything is a game of appearances these days. Especially history that has become a hostage of all perverted "isms". Not least those who took part in it are the ones who suffer the enlightening lie. After all, isn't conjuring the past, telling it in a new language, presenting it in an improved or deteriorated version just a lie adorned with fancy feathers? I grew up in a surrounding that no longer exists. Among those who survived the war: Grandparents, father, mother, aunts, uncles. Some fought, others were children, others died only because someone considered them inferior. The September campaign of 1939, roundups, prisons, public executions - these were the topics of my childhood. Every family gathering, each meeting became an opportunity to talk about those burdens times. Frequently it seems to me that on a par with them I became a victim of the war, that I never

experienced. Even worse, as I listened to their stories, I've often witnessed a certain longing in their eyes, so I could not understand how one might yearn for something as terrible as war, hence I censured them in my heart, not knowing that what they meant was their lost youth.

For this is a story of lost youth, a tale of transformation so profound and dramatic that it brings into existence a new entity in a dehumanized, uniformed shape. It is also a narrative of cast-away illusions concerning the nature of encompassing reality. It is, finally, a fictionalized but truthful testimony of a generation that is fading away and will be gone in a matter of days. By writing this book, adopting such a form of narration, I wanted perhaps for the last time to share their voice and let them tell their story in their own words. Many of the events I have cited either happened or, for the most part, consist of stories of flesh and blood people. These are memories of my parents, grandparents, and other family members. It is also a record of conversations I had in the late 1990s and early 2000s with Polish soldiers of the 1939 September Campaign or (to respect the principle of correspondence) with Germans who served as members of the Wehrmacht, Waffen SS, and other auxiliary formations. However, once again I would like to emphasize: this publication is not of a scientific or historical nature, although it refers to facts, it should be perceived in the categories of factual fiction.

Ultimately, we all rose as part of their telling, becoming a fraction of the world they shaped for approaching the future. So in a way, it is a story of ourselves, only in a different time and under different circumstances. But it is still us... the same people from tens if not hundreds of thousands of years ago. The same ones who in the name of a higher idea were able to fall as low as possible, and the

same ones who in the name of a petty thing rose to the heights of the human spirit, setting an example for future generations. We are the core of the novel, and the next after us so ones after them. We are writing our stories right now even while reading theirs. As such, the only thing that bonds us is our imagination and the barbarity we might indulge on. The mills keep on grinding: deed after deed, patiently waiting for their Don Quixotes to crush and grate their bones into flour of which the eternal baker will form the loaf of tomorrow - our daily feed.

It is also, if not primarily, a chronicle of the crimes perpetrated by one person against another. And those people who have blood on their hands should be named. Not with a desire of retribution or ill need of punishment, but for the sake of the victims and the immensity of the suffering they lived through. Accordingly, the attentive reader will note that in the book, which is quite voluminous, the word „Nazi” is used 4 times of which two are in the quoted text. This is an intentional effort and, I might add, used with full responsibility of the written word.

Under today's nomenclature, the unspecified Nazis are assumed to be responsible for the outbreak of war and the enormity of the perpetrated atrocities. Interchangeably, the term German Nazis appear in some publications. Both phrases are, so to speak, just downright overkill. For they imply the guilt of a relatively small group in comparison to the entire community.

In June 1933 the NSDAP had a membership of 2,493,890 which was only a fraction of the population, who blindly believing their leaders, elected by their votes nonetheless went to war with the rest of Europe and eventually the world. The population of the Third Reich



before the outbreak of the Second World War was 69 million. As a result of warfare, it suffered great demographic losses. More than 6 million people died. In 1944 the Nazi party had 8.5 million members, and if we assume that already in 1944 the loss of population amounted to the aforementioned 6 million, this is still only 8.5 million out of 63 million, which gives us approximately 13.5% of the total population. These simple yet generalized figures are a merciless illustration of the scale of the mystification now being promoted to whitewash or dilute the responsibility of the entire German nation and shift it to the Nazis regardless of national correlation. Crimes in the East and West were often committed by Germans who were never members of the Nazi party, and the labor of millions of slaves forcibly deported from all over Europe was used by farmers, manufacturers, and pharmaceutical companies. Women kidnapped from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other places were often used as domestic servants, in practice turned to slaves often sexually exploited. In Poland and Russia, killings were committed by cobblers, farmers, cooks, teachers, students, shopkeepers in German uniforms and only a small percentage of these men belonged to the Nazi party, yet they had one thing in common - they were all German.

Broadly speaking, most German citizens benefited from the suffering and death of millions, and under no circumstances can their accountability as a nation should be passed on to internationalized Nazis, as this is simply a relativization of history.

As far as civil resistance to Nazism in Germany is concerned, it is important to note that it existed and its extent was best demonstrated by the establishment of the first concentration camp in Dachau in March 1933, and then some other: Oranienburg 1933, Lichtenburg 1933, Esterwegen

1933, Sachsenhausen 1936, Buchenwald 1937, Flossenbürg 1938, Neuengamme 1938. Followed by many more, naming of which will not change anything, since by the outbreak of the war virtually all significant resistance to Nazism had been suppressed and those opposing the Nazis perished in the institutions listed above.

And so we come to the point when, on September 1, 1939, the "purified" German nation goes to war that, in the opinion of those who instigated it, thus the majority, is the accomplishment of historical justice and at the same time serves as a form of atonement for the humiliation and suffered wrongs.

Hatred and the resulting will to fight are often rooted in the conviction of inflicted injustice. Immediately after defeat in the Great War, Germans were told that their great army did not lose, but was betrayed by politicians who, against national interests, ordered the army to cease operations and accepted the dictates of the Entente. It was, regardless of how you look at it, a founding lie from which, as if from a well-trodden garden, the self-consciousness of the new state blossomed. Consequently, this lie, as well as the fostering of racial hatred, particularly against the Jews, became calorific fodder for the National Socialists, who repeated it until most Germans fell for it. Thus, through a seemingly innocent bias, the idea of Germany's superiority and privileged position in relation to the rest of the European nations was born. The time of reckoning was at hand. And what happened next we all know from history classes...

Hence, please forgive the insufficient use of the term „Nazis“, as for me and for many families in Poland this is a sealed and evident matter. Our parents and grandparents, those who survived - witnesses of history - called things and

people by their names. So I, the author, as well as the son of those who survived, should use their language.

Well, in their words again: "War begins in one man's head, and ends in the tears of millions". These are the lines of my mom Ida (born in 1928), while my father Marian (born in 1924), although it is not entirely certain, various documents prove otherwise (so 1918 or 1924) used to say: "The war took everything away from us except the will to live, that's why we are still here, and you, my son may look back at me."

Looking at the world today, seeing the amazing ability of people to remain wrong and, on the other hand, the stubborn inability to conclude, I do not doubt that what happened to the German nation could happen to any other. As a reporter, I have seen with my own eyes on numerous occasions how seemingly peaceful demonstrations turn into violent and hateful encounters. And usually, all it takes is one or two individuals, someone who takes the first step, willing to do whatever under normal circumstances is met with strong objections. Our decency, social norms, and the framework of law wherein we navigate are merely contractual barriers separating entire societies from the darkness of evil lurking behind the curtain of humanity. It took one man to convince the rest to accept things they previously thought were wrong. Don't think it's over. Oh no! Democracy tends to have, like any other contract, for it is only a social agreement, as many holes as Swiss cheese. And believe me, there are plenty of like-minded individuals in politics who, like Mr. H in the past, are waiting for the right moment to slip through one of these holes and opt to carve out piece after piece until there is nothing left of this curd, so in one day, we will wake up as if in the same social paradise with a slight difference - a world outside the window will

become a place full of enemies and those who wish us ill. From now on our leaders, whom we have elected ourselves, will warn us day after day, scaring us with pointing fingers at our internal and external enemies. They will deal with them on our behalf and give justice to the wronged social groups. They will defend the good name of the motherland while slandering the others. Are you familiar with this? Perhaps you still think that it could happen only in Germany. Or maybe you already live in such a country. The darkest place is under the candlestick, and there's more than one country in good old Europe right now where it all starts from the outset. The Jews (Holocaust victims) have been replaced by people from the Middle East or those of a different sexual orientation, about whom one of the presidents said that "they are no longer people but an ideology" - that needs to be challenged. It's just my interpretation of occurrences, as far as the part about the challenge is concerned. Whom will we challenge next? Atheists, Mormons, bulimics, overweight people, those with inherited genetic conditions? Or could it be you or me?

It may sound mundane, but we mustn't lose our guard. The drudgery of everyday life, repetitiveness, and convenience of existence has caused us to lapse, as long as the favorite show runs on television and a plate of hot soup stands on the table all the rest doesn't bother our minds. At least until someone knocks on our door and forces us out of seemingly our home. Until someone pins a tag on our chest or makes us wear an armband deeming some of us inferior. That is what this book is about, the change that creeps up on a man when his reason is asleep. About ordinary boys in whom a monster always lived, but lacked the substance to wake him up. About shattered hopes and poisonous illusions as to the principles governing one's life. It is still within us,

though we like to think of ourselves, that when the time of trial comes we will be able to resist it..

Well, can we?

### **„Blut und Ehre“**

Halfway through April 1942, the talk of promotions grew louder, but no one seemed happy. The Division basically ceased to exist; of 120-plus men in Behrendt's company, only 35 were left alive - that's less than a quarter. A chaser from Hauptsturmführer reached the deeply entrenched bunker. The cannons were sounding out of the north. The messenger shrank on himself but Holger reassured the young man with a smile on his scarred face.

- Get a grip on yourself! Above us, there is a ceiling made of four cross-stacked layers of sturdy Russian logs and a meter and a half high cover of greasy soil from the bosom of Mother Russia. Nothing threatens us here.

Hearing the Obersturmführer's assurances, the boy utters a loud "ugh", and on his emaciated, scarf-wrapped, a partly blue face appears something akin to relief mixed with joy. Behrendt fixes the leather brace that covers his still festering eye wound and looks at a young man with a steely gaze, unable to shake the feeling that the expression of satisfaction on that boy's face is unnatural. It's as if the muscles responsible for conveying emotion have grown tired of working towards the final result - a smile. It's hard to blame him anyway, who else smiles in this swamp?

- So what does the old man want from me this time?

- Hauptsturmführer Knöchlein wants to see you. Please come right away!

- Sure!

Behrendt burst out.

- Sauber! Give the boy something warm to eat and get me a working motorcycle!

Returning from Knöchlein's briefing, Behrendt summoned Wainwright, who had constantly been overlooked

for promotions. After thoughtless remarks about the incompetence of commanders, while Division stationed in France, Paul increasingly felt disfavor of the superiors. In fact, it seemed difficult to blame them for this state of affairs, considering his loose tongue. The former team leader of Holger was a capable and educated soldier, but he had absolutely no political instinct. Eicke was well aware of this, and appreciating his leadership skills, he shielded the wayward soldier from the bloodthirsty hyenas whenever possible, but even he was not so well-placed to protect Wainwright over the long run. Hauptsturmführer Fritz downright hated him, sometimes vociferously calling him a "politically suspect element," which Wainwright ignored, sneering publicly at Knöchlein that the greatest achievement of his military career was the murder of defenseless Tomies at Le Paradis in May 1940, and even that not of his own inspiration.

- What did the heroic Fritz want this time!

- Will you just shut up, fool? You'll end up against the wall for this kind of talk, or someone will finally shoot you in the back. Man, everyone hates you!

- What the fuck am I, a cuddle puppet for the little girls? That's enough for me if cunts are scared.

- Cut it out! I warned you...

- Then what did he want?

- We're moving in an hour! After six months of fighting for survival, we'll finally jerk Ivan's throat. We'll go along the banks of the Lovat River to Ramushevo so as to link up with the attacking groups from outside the cauldron.

- What should I do?

Take Volker and as a spearhead, you'll ride on tank destroyers. I don't know how you'll do it, but it's your job not to lose momentum. Otherwise, Fritz will rip your balls off and feed them to his cat.

- It would be better for him if he ate those himself, maybe then he would have something of a real man within him. Hahaha!

- For fuck's sake! Just do the bloody thing!

Paul on a destroyer set off on the road Vasilievshchina - Biakovo, followed by the motorcycle gunners. In the morning they captured Zakoritno, from where in the evening, advancing simultaneously on both sides of the road, they launched an attack on Biakovo. The fighting was fierce but Ivan gave way. The next day they advanced along the road toward Omychkino; the terrain was overgrown with dense forest and bushes; a thaw began in the swampy thickets, which made the attack much more difficult; in addition, the Russians mined the communication lines. The engineers called for help did their best, but suffered heavy losses. Stukas arrived and bombarded Ivan's positions directly on the road Omychkino-Ramushevo. On the 20th of April Wainwright and his men plunge into Ramushevo and soak their boots in the icy waters of the Lovat River. Even the heroic Fritz seemed impressed. Although he hates Paul, he knows that God created him just for such a job.

- Only this bastard and his hoodlums could cut a three-kilometer-wide passage to the river in such a short time. He grumbles under his breath and calls out for Behrendt.

- Good job! Tell the big mouth that he did well. I've just received promotional orders. Congratulations on the rank of Hauptsturmführer, whilst from now on you can call me Sturmbannführer.

- And Paul?

Holger asked surprised.

What about him?

Knöchlein answered, equally surprised.

- No... nothing. Is that all?



-Yes... In general, that's all. You can leave now. See Werner on the way, he has a case of cognac for you. After all, today is Führer's birthday.

The coming months bring with them days that drag on like oiled guts, basically indistinguishable one from another. The pitched battles seem endless: assaults, retreats, offensive actions, loss of men, replenishment of manpower, and means of warfare. Behrend doesn't even try to learn the names of the newly arrived soldiers, for what is the point, since usually the next day the squad and platoon leaders bring him linen sacks full of broken metal plates with names. Sometimes, especially in the evenings, he believed himself to be a mortuary manager rather than a Waffen SS Company Commander. Every night, he fills in the tables with the names of the fallen and copies letters, learned by heart, informing the parents or wives of the deaths of men and boys whom the Reich had put in his care, and whom he could in no way save from the insatiable death that inhabited these swamps and forests. In early August, orders arrived to widen the narrow supply routes, especially to the west, and to regain lost positions. With an unexpected, quick strike, the Division recaptures most of the outposts given up during the winter. In the vanguard of the attack, as usual, Wainwright and his creeps from under the dark star reign supreme. Again, like mushrooms after the rain, white crosses sprout up in the midst of the forest and swamp green. On August 10, Volker gets wounded, the fourth time since the invasion of the Soviet Union and the fifth time overall since the war began. As always, the wounds turn out to be rather superficial and after a few days of bumming around in the rear, Jörg returns to the company, with another gold badge awarded for wounds.

Enemy cavalry harassed the Company night and day, coming very close and attacking only to retreat after a while, the same with mounted artillery from which Holger's men often received direct fire. The assaults repeat over and over again, always in the least expected circumstances. Whoever has not learned to improvise, using every available cover, break in the terrain, cavity, or trunk, has his days or even hours curtailed. Fritz tells Holger to send Paul to deal with the Russian artillery. Wainwright has been nicknamed the fireman for some time. The whole battalion knows about his exploits. Soldiers love him and commanders hate, or maybe they are just afraid, or both. A young officer, a capable tactician, versed in the strategy of large forces, skillfully using practical knowledge and theory of warfare from different eras, is always going to be a bone in the throat of stiff, conservative staffers. They would always see him as a threat, a competition and never let him get near enough to compromise them. Yes, they will send him to put out the fires they have started, but neither will they ever show gratitude for saving their butts. People like Wainwright are necessary to them, like water for fish, space for birds, but that doesn't stop them from holding him in contempt and constantly pillorying the man down. Fortunately for them, Paul does not give a damn, he does his job, puts out fire after fire using his own blood. If everyone was like him, the war would be over long ago, or it would never end... For Paul, blood and honor are the essences of life, and life is a never-ending struggle.

After another attack by the "butchers"<sup>1</sup> Behrendt went to the woods behind the company positions where his soldiers were digging shallow graves in the wet, soggy ground. He watched as they, covered in mud, threw their

1 Il-2 (Russian: Ил-2) is a Soviet World War II-era attack aircraft (Russian: Штурмовик) designed by Sergei Ilyushin.

yesterday's comrades, sewn up in canvas sacks, into hastily dug shallow pits and wondered if he would end up here, too. These few trees were all that remained of a sizable forest grove. Planes and Stalin's organs<sup>2</sup> had effectively wiped out any sign of life from the landscape. Charred stumps stretched twisted boughs towards the sky as if in this way they wanted to point out the direction from where death had struck.

The end of summer in the swamps means rain, unprecedented amounts of water, and mud! Ivan spits with everything he has, enemy artillerymen work around the clock, there are more and more wounded who need to be transported to the rear. Holger's men have to do it on foot, alone on their own backs, or with luck in pairs, on folding canvas stretchers. Even the tracked vehicles are bogged down in the quagmire into which the whole area has turned. The front moves back and forth like the sea at high tide. The company loses contact with its neighbors on the wings, as it

- 2 The Katyusha multiple rocket launcher (Russian: Катюша, IPA: [kə'tʲuʂə]) (About this soundlisten)) is a type of rocket artillery first built and fielded by the Soviet Union in World War II. Multiple rocket launchers such as these deliver explosives to a target area more quickly than conventional artillery, but with lower accuracy and requiring a longer time to reload. They are fragile compared to artillery guns, but are cheap, easy to produce, and usable on any chassis. The Katyushas of World War II, the first self-propelled artillery mass-produced by the Soviet Union, were usually mounted on ordinary trucks. This mobility gave the Katyusha, and other self-propelled artillery, another advantage: being able to deliver a large blow all at once, and then move before being located and attacked with counter-battery fire.

were, becoming a deep peninsula in an ocean of fire and blood. Most of the young boys from the replacements ended up in cavities in the scorched forest. Forced volunteers - that's how they were referred to. Many found their way to the front as a result of a nasty ruse. As they told it, schools or HJ squads received invitations to cinemas where propaganda films from the front were screened. The showing would be followed by a lecture on the sacrifice of young Germans, on heroism and love for the fatherland. In the end, the speaker would announce:

- You have seen irrefutable evidence of the fortitude of your peers. For a moment you could participate in the triumph of their will. Your homeland is calling you. You will not be inferior to them. Unless someone lacks courage and prefers to stick to his mother's hand?

Saying that the recruiter took out the subscription papers and called out:

- Whoever is not a coward will enlist today. It is enough that you are 17 and love your country!

Which teenager would resist such manipulation? They enlisted in whole classes and died in the same way, far away from their mothers' reach, in the incessant rain or crackling frost, in the swamps of Demiansk. Their bones will remain here forever.

The beginning of September brings even more rain. Bunkers and dugouts turn into swamps, while the communications trenches and shooting ditches turn into canals and rushing rivers. There is no fire, damp wood in the stoves doesn't want to burn. Behrendt had not changed his clothes for a week. Besides, he had no dry rags left. People are getting ill with dysentery, they are moving literally with their pants in their hands not being able to hold their feces. The rotting corpses of Russkie's abandoned on the outskirts gave off that slightly sweet, and at the same time nostril- and

throat-scratching, vomit-inducing stench, with the smell of spicy mustard mixed with sugar and nutmeg. Stalin's organs and cannons rut the ground daily like harrows, scattering the bodies of barely buried colleagues. Behrendt, by way of example and morale-boosting, personally buries them, sometimes the same ones, several times a day. Volker's cynical sense of humor is always present. Once, reporting to the Sturmbannführer with documents, he claimed to be a senior mortician from a funeral company, for which he was punished by being assigned to bury the dead. That is, not at all.

A plague of suicides spread through the company. One elderly man, from the spring replacements, having learned of the death of his entire family - a wife and two daughters in an air raid, rushed towards the Ivan line as he stood. Holger tried to stop him, but the old man purposely came under the fire of their machine guns. For his part, the youngest officer, Untersturmführer Wenk, who had been shot in the head, went into convulsions, as if he had Parkinson's. He walked like that for a few days, and finally, having found himself inside a communications bunker, he grabbed a pistol lying on the table and shot himself in the face in front of everyone. He died in the mud, in convulsions, which shook his body even after death. The frontal panic did not escape Wainwright's hoodlums either. Sturmann Michael Rilke and his brother Kurt, for unknown reasons, blew themselves up with a grenade near the field kitchen. Shreds of their bodies fell into the cauldrons and as a result, the warm soup everyone was waiting for ended up in one of the flooded shooting trenches.

- Fuck, it's worse here than by the Berezina!<sup>3</sup>

3 The Battle of (the) Berezina (or Beresina) took place from 26 to 29 November 1812, between the French army of Napoleon, retreating after the aborted occupation of

Shamelessly complained Paul.

- We will drown in this mud, or freeze as soon as the first snow appears. We are the elite of the army, and they treat us like cannon fodder as if we could be replaced by just any loony recruited in the cinema!

- Stop it now!

Holger intervened.

- No, I won't. That dolt Fritz should hear this!

- Paul! He's just waiting for it! You'll be court-martialed followed by a bullet into your head.

- Bullshit! Knöchlein doesn't have the balls to do it. It is one thing to blow up some Englishmen, but another to take on a German officer.

An autumn storm rolled across the Russian sky, the rain and wind hitting Paul's face at the same moment, who screamed out of despair, or perhaps out of powerlessness, or like any self-respecting egocentric, just wished for attention.

- Come on Paul.

Waldo, who watched everything from a safe distance, as usual, approached him. He patted Wainwright on the shoulder and gently pushed his way over.

- Come on, let's go...

- These graves, all these graves are his fault! He doesn't know how to lead, if it wasn't for me and Holger, they'd all be chewing sand a long damn time ago. We're dying here and this son of a bitch is drinking cognac and tea made of filtered water. The heroic Fritz, for fuck's sake!

That night Paul left his bunker and since then nobody in the company had seen him. Only when a messenger with the

---

Moscow and trying to cross the Berezina (near Borisov, Belarus), and the Russian armies under Peter Wittgenstein and Admiral Pavel Chichagov. The battle ended with a mixed outcome. The French suffered heavy losses but Napoleon with the core of his army managed to cross the river.

morning orders arrived it turned sour that the drunken Wainwright had broken into the Sturmbannführer's private quarters and, in the presence of his orderly, spat in his face and then slapped him. For which he was promptly arrested.

Finally, the news about the relief came. After a few days, clean-shaven and ironed Wehrmacht boys arrive. Behrendt and his men look like a bunch of beggars in front of a church during a Sunday mass, for which everyone except them wore festive clothes. A distinguished Oberstlutenant<sup>4</sup>, wearing a tailor-made uniform, asks Volker about the platoon leader. Jörg answers him politely.

- Her Oberst, Battalion Commander Knöchlein is sitting next to Company Commander Behrendt there, under a bush. He points his finger at two pale, almost translucent figures dressed in what was probably once a uniform. The eyebrows of the relieving officer raise in an expression of admiration and awe. Meanwhile, Volker continues.

- And that is not a platoon but a Battalion, or at least what is left of it. Her Oberst... Make yourselves comfortable and cherish this land, for our blood has soaked into it like water into a sponge.

Saying this he wiped his eyes wet with tears. Looking at the jagged, scorched forest surrounded by swamps, he was moved for perhaps the first time in his life. Behrendt could not believe his eyes as he looked at the crying Volker.

- Do you see that?

He asked Fritz. But Fritz was also crying. In a small clearing sat less than 40 people, in appearance more like wraiths than someone alive. They were the remnants of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment of the SS "Totenkopf" Division, which, after going through the hell of Demiansk, existed only on paper. Fritz cried, and so did everyone around, except one person. Holger, even if he had wanted to, could not bring out

4 Ger. Lieutenant Colonel

that spark of humanity in him. Time had turned his heart into a crystal icicle. Ever since the events at the Post Office, he had felt like a forgotten machine, left running, whose operator had long since grown old and died. For him, tears were an unnecessary waste of energy. A sign of extreme weakness, and a reason to be ashamed. He looked at his colleagues and in his spirit, he despised each of them, and most of all the commander, who growled like a hysterical girl.

\*\*\*

A strange silence reigned aboard the train. Holger, Waldo, and Jörg seized the service compartment where no one else had boarded. From afar, as if in the background, perhaps from another carriage, music came to their ears. Someone was playing the popular Russian theme "Katyusha" on the accordion. The soldiers sang in German:

Vom Ladogasee im Norden  
zogen wir durch Eis und Schnee,  
zu Starija Russas Mauern  
am verfluchten Ilmensee.

Partisanen rings umlauern,  
nachts klingt krächzend ihr Hurrä,  
in Starija Russas Mauern,  
am verfluchten Ilmensee.

48 Grad im Schatten  
setzt sogar der Stuhlgang matt,  
wenn wir das in Frankreich hatten,  
fand der Krieg im Sande statt.

Lovely ladies and rote roses,



Nachtlokale sind uns fremd,  
aber Läuse und Franzosen,  
und die Wanzen jeder kennt.

Nachts die Sowjets-Kaffern ballern,  
unentwegt knallt die Artillerie,  
unsere Feldpost ist verschollen,  
Heimaturlaub gibt es nie.

Mag der Krieg noch 10 Jahre dauern,  
we halten durch bei Eis und Schnee,  
um Starija Russas Mauern,  
am verfluchten Ilmensee.<sup>5</sup>

- What will happen to Wainwright?

Chief Sauber asked.

- Now everything hinges on Eicke. But I see it poorly. The Obergruppenführer has already tarnished his reputation so many times by standing up for his foul tongue, that this time he'll probably hand him over to the hyenas to chew on.

- They won't do shit to him!

As usual, Volker chimed in a very subtle way.

- Wainwright may have a rough temper. But right now they can't afford to get rid of someone like him. The old man understands that well and won't let a hair fall off his head. In fact, nothing has happened. Heroic Fritz got smacked in the face? So what? Nothing fell off his head. Eicke knows that Knöchlein is a dime a dozen in the Division and Wainwright is unique on a cosmic scale. The worst that can happen to him now is to be reprimanded and overlooked for promotions

- from his point of view: a fly shit on his sleeve. He'll serve a

---

5 A song from 1942, sung in the Demyansk Pocket. by Alfred Scholz to the well-known Russian tune "Primavera", Katyusha".

week or two, they'll force him to apologize to the dolt and it'll all fall apart.

- How is it Volker that you are always right?

Holger scratched the hollow eye socket hidden under the flap.

Unlike the rest of you intellectuals, I, Hauptsturmführer, am guided by my own experience and not by some magical mystical knowledge squeezed like a cyst out of some professor's sick head. Life is the best university.

In the evening they reached Riga, where they stayed overnight. Early next day, they continued west. The quartermaster had given them provisions for four days.

- France, then!

Jörg looked like a little boy whose eyes were peering into a dream toy. Behrendt watched him anxiously.

- Just stay out of trouble this time.

- You know me...

- That's why I'm warning you faithfully. Unlike Wainwright, if you get into trouble, a dog with a lame leg won't stand up for you.

- Thank you for your concern. I can handle it.

There was an insincere, almost forced smile on Volker's face.

- I'll kill you someday...

He thought, still smiling at his commander.

- I'll cut out your heart and feed it to Knöchlein's cat. Or better yet: I'll boil it in white sauce and serve it to your girlfriend with onions and pepper.

Holger did not like the look under Jörg's eyes. He knew that beneath that forced politeness lurked something chaotic, something like a black hole that absorbed all light. With that kind of darkness, no one stands a chance. This evil that has taken the temporal form of Volker is not from our world. It is older than the earth and the sun.

- Poisonous in its simplicity, a primordial entity resisting the power of the Logos directing our affairs. Almost aloud, Behrendt whispered.

- Hahaha... what are you mumbling about again?

- Oh... Shut up, you twat!

Anticipating trouble, Sauber took out a cognac-filled canteen from his backpack.

- Look what I got here. Fritz will be furious, coz the tea in his expensive bottles has gone sour, but the cognac in our canteens has gone sweet.

All three of them burst out laughing.

They left the train in Angoulême<sup>6</sup> and in the morning the first lucky ones got their leave, among them Holger.

\*\*\*

Danzig Hauptbahnhof hadn't changed much since the brawl that had set the fate of many young people in motion. The wooden fences and scaffolding had disappeared, the pots of dwarfed trees were gone, the flowers had dissolved into memories, but the rest... The rest was very much in its place. Holger took his first steps to the police station, hoping to find Kufner there. The young policeman, upon seeing the scarred face of the Hauptsturmführer, stretched out like a tensioned piano string giving a high C. Behrendt stretched out his right hand and calmly, although with a military edge in his voice, greeted the young man.

- Heil Hitler! I am looking for the Oberwachtmeister.

---

6 Angoulême is a town and commune in France, in the region of New Aquitaine, capital of the department of Charente, on the Charente River, historical capital of the province of Angoumois.

- Mr. Fabel is on his rounds, but he will be back in five or ten minutes.

The boy answered, staring at the SS-man's face like into a sacred icon.

- Fabel?

Holger's face took on an expression of surprised disappointment.

- I am looking for Kufner.

- Oh, yes? I'm sorry, Hauptsturmführer. The previous crew was disbanded just before Julfest in 1941, some went to the concentration camps and some were sent to the Eastern Front. They fell in with some big shot from the Geheime Staatspolizei<sup>7</sup>, rumor had it that this Kufner was a communist. Which I personally do not believe. A policeman and a communist? That's like a teacher being illiterate - nonsense!

Holger looked at the boy, saluted, and left. He threw it over his shoulder.

- I don't know any illiterate teachers, but a communist policeman? Oh yes... It's most possible.

Mrs. Tekla's house looked exactly like in Behrendt's recent dream. The carefully repainted facade, autumn flowers at the entrance, the door open, and the sound of the radio coming from the kitchen. Hauptsturmführer entered without knocking, stopping only at the framed door separating the kitchen from the hallway. Mrs. Güze sat at the table over a bowl of hazelnuts.

- You are a grumpy old housewife!

Behrendt announced in a longing, shrugging voice.

---

7 The Geheime Staatspolizei (transl. Secret State Police), abbreviated Gestapo (German: [gə'ʃta:po]; /gə'stɑ:pøʃ/), was the official secret police of Nazi Germany and in German-occupied Europe.

- And you are a bad-tempered boy and I'm not surprised that your mother got rid of you so quickly.

The landlady rose from the table and, disregarding established conventions, firmly but affectionately embraced the man, whose face in no way resembled the face of the boy who had once lived under her roof.

He spent a whole day and a sleepless night in Old Oliva. Mrs. Güze bedded him in his former room. He felt in it like a lost soul in a tomb. Three years had passed. Just three, or as many as three - day after day, hour after hour, doomed in the name of the future.

- Where is that future, or is it still there at all?

As he lay in bed he thought of the Oberwahrmeister's words. About the ever-grinding mills of history.

Kufner did not like to play the wise man, he was rather a modest person, expressing himself in a simple and sometimes even ascetic way, but always with care for the language he used. He read a lot. Holger had never seen him without a book or a newspaper in his hand. Always thoughtful, he seemed more like a scientist as opposed to a policeman with his round wire-rimmed glasses. He did not like long speeches, nor did he boast of his knowledge and erudition, which after all he was not lacking. On the contrary, he spoke rarely, briefly, and concisely, but when he did, people who knew him might rest assured that his words would sink deeply into their memory. It was as if the thoughts enchanted in the sound of his voice imprinted their indelible mark on the consciousness of the addressee. Yes... Oberwahrmeister Michael was a teacher without cause. People learned by him the truth about the world and life. These were unforeseen lessons, but, as Holger had experienced himself, very necessary.

- And where is he now?

The Hauptsturmführer asked, sobbing. The pea-sized tears, the headache, the packed nose, and the spasmodic shaking were something the rock-hard SS-man had forgotten. And yet now, it all came back to him, especially when he heard about the fate of the man who was virtually his father. No... Not by blood but by choice, by love as pure as an infant's tears. Last year, in late summer, Mrs. Tekla, and wife since January 1940, received word of the Oberwahrmeister's death. The letter stated that Michael Kufner had died of a chronic illness in Flossenbürg concentration camp, on the border of Lower and Upper Bavaria.

- If there is some form of existence beyond death, if we go somewhere further, then surely Kufner is there and teaches stray souls how to follow the light... I am alone, there is no one left in this world who is dear to me. Inga clings to my heart, though she deserves someone better. I do not know how to free myself from her, I love her and hate at the same hand, I run away from her and miss her simultaneously... Mother seems to have forgotten me - the last I got a letter from her was in 1940 in France, then she ceased to write. Apparently, she remarried some important man in the Reich Chancellery. Anton hid in a fog of old memories and will probably never come out of it again. Or maybe he and Kufner are just roaming the sunny expanses of Elysium and worldly matters have long since left their minds? Wainwright and Volker are a prosthetic family to me right now. Fate has bound us by an invisible thread of brotherhood and enmity. We're all on the edge of an abyss, pinned together. One false step and we're gone.

He wiped tears from his scarred cheek, opened his wallet, and took out a photo of a woman he had once taken from an Englishman foreboding death. He looked at the face on the photograph and whispered:

- You alone know of all my secrets, you have heard my innermost thoughts, but I know nothing about you,

absolutely nothing. You are only a beautiful face from a photograph I stole from a dying soldier, and yet you are closer than the woman who threw everything away and followed me to the East, closer than my mother who did not want to remember me, than my father who sank into the oblivion some 15 years ago. Death is not enough to hold me accountable for all the wickedness I have committed. So life... Living with the consciousness of a flawed soul, a deficiency of character, and a tendency to self-pitying, often taking the form of self-indulgence. Life against the will and will against life. Here's my penance.

He sighed, turned off the lamp, and fell asleep. He dreamed of a world without war, of school and frolics on the beach together with the ghosts of his dead friends.

\*\*\*

After serving two weeks, Wainwright faced officers court of honor. He was ordered to apologize to the heroic Fritz, who generously accepted his younger colleague's "sincere" remorse. By a strange coincidence, just a few days before the trial, Knöchlein got invited to pay a visit to the Obergruppenführer's house, just like Holger and his merry company before.

- So what, I told you, they wouldn't do shit to him!

Volker shouted with an expression of triumph mixed with joy on his face red from an excess of wine.

- So what do you say, you old bastard? Did they grind your stripes down to nothing, or are you still stabbing at the eyes of the common soldiers with your officer's swagger?

- Oh... Excuse me! First of all, I'm not old! I won't argue with the second expression. Secondly, since when you address an officer this way, you scoundrel?

He grabbed Volker by the open hem of his uniform and with one strong jerk knocked him to the ground.

- Keep your guard up, you drunken mug!

Laughter filled the dimly lit room.

Holger walked up to Paul and shook his hand.

- It is good that you are back. Everything will be all right now.

He looked at Behrendt with an expression of surprise and disapproval.

- What is wrong with you?

- Something happened to him away. He came like that from his leave.

Lurking every few seconds, Chief Sauber set the empty bottle of Bordeaux down on the ground and reached into the box for another one.

- He's fine! He's just fucking with himself!

Added Volker, rising from the ground.

- Maybe you're a faggot. Well? Just don't tell me he started coloring himself up?

Wainwright grabbed him by the neck and kissed him on the cheek. Furious, Holger pushed Paul away with all his strength and screamed:

- That faggie is going to blast your face off! Calm down or you'll all sober up in the ancil. Are you tired of one guy getting whacked for attacking a superior? Do you all want to go to jail? Yeah? I'll have you all locked up!

- Well, finally! That's much better.

Wainwright was happy.

-That's good old Behrendt!

\*\*\*

Since Paul's return, the veterans from Demyansk have been touring France, moving through the occupied territory until they manage to put down roots in Mont Moreau in the autumn. On November 9, the Division



received a new official name, the 3rd SS Panzer Grenadier Division "Totenkopf". In recognition of the Division's achievements, the Führer assigns to Eicke weapons and equipment to reform not only the staff and subordinate services, but also to reorganize and strengthen the combat value of the entire unit, starting with an artillery regiment, through two three-battalion armored grenadier regiments, a reconnaissance regiment consisting of two motorcycle battalions, a reconnaissance company and a machine gun company, an armored regiment consisting of two light tank companies Pzkw. III, medium tank company Pzkw. IV, heavy tank company Pzkw. VI "Tiger", and additionally an assault gun squadron with auxiliary units. An anti-aircraft defense squadron and an anti-tank squadron were included. A considerable influx of fresh blood was also noted, unfortunately mostly forced volunteers. One rainy morning, their old acquaintance Oberscharführer Müntefering arrived at the Division with a newly brought group of recruits from Danzig. Volker could not contain his outburst of joy.

- For God's sake! There is justice after all! Now the fat pig would pay for every insult, every minute of humiliation we had suffered.

- Jörg! I forbid you to go near him! I warn you, stay away from that man!

Behrendt didn't look like he was joking. Volker nodded as a sign that he understood.

- It was pleasant to dream for at least a moment.

He burped, saluted, and politely moved away.

After Christmas, intensive combat training began. Fokko Müntefering became the company's training Chief. Holger giggled like a child when he learned the name of his new instructor.

- Don't say that out loud! If they heard that, they would pee themselves laughing.

- I myself certainly wet my own cradle when I learned my name Hauptsturmführer!
- Müntefering roared like an old horse and Behrendt cheered him on.
- But we have to call you something. Hmm... Maybe Ulbrecht? It sounds serious.
- If we're choosing, I'd prefer something lighter, like Egon or Hans.
- Hans sounds awkward with your surname, but Egon? Yeah... I think that's it. Then what? Oberscharführer Egon? Okay, I'll introduce myself as Egon.

At the beginning of January, all the firing squads in the company received two MG42s, as well as grenade launchers, plus Type 42 Granatwerfer's.<sup>8</sup>

Using the new equipment, Chief Egon squeezed the last sweat out of the newly arrived forced volunteers. Behrendt, who was watching him, involuntarily recalled Schwarz. Volker was promoted to Unterscharführer and became chief of training for the reconnaissance platoon. The fighting in the swamps and in the woods had taught them a great deal, which Holger and Wainwright felt they should make the most of by transferring practical knowledge to the new recruits. Surprisingly, Müntefering and Jörg finally managed to establish an understanding by synchronizing the company's training schedule. After three weeks, the first progress could already be seen among the still verdant boys, forcibly detached from their mothers' arms. Rumor spread that the next stop of the Division was to be Africa, the

8 Grenatwerfer 42 - a German 120mm caliber mortar of World War II used by the Wehrmacht, a copy of the Soviet 120mm mortar of 1938 pattern, manufactured at Erste Brünnner Maschinenfabrik in Brno (Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) from 1942 to 1945.

storekeepers were even preparing Afrika Korps desert uniforms. But no... This as before the invasion of Russia turns out to be just wishful thinking. Instead, Behrendt's men receive a new ration of winter gear: thick woolen pants, sheepskin coats, jackets, fur-lined mittens, and high felt boots with hard leather trimmings, plus the usual several pairs of woolen socks, a set of loafers, and warm underwear, including the much-coveted underpants, all clearly indicating the destination of their future journey. Anyway, what could they expect after what happened in Stalingrad? On January 31, the daily radio program on the state broadcaster was replaced by a particularly dismal airing of the adagio from Anton Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, after which the announcer declared the defeat of the Sixth Army.

Nearly 300,000 dead and a quarter of a million in captivity, such a fire could not be put out even by a whole division of Wainwrights... Probably for the first time, at first timidly, yet deep down, at the bottom of the hearts of the young and old Germans gathered around Volksempfänger<sup>9</sup> germinated the fear that the war with Ivan could not be won. Paul looked deeply into Holger's eyes and asked:

- Do you still think I was wrong?

- I never said you were wrong, only that you were foolish to share your thoughts with the world. Think about what would

9 The Volksempfänger "people's receiver" was a series of radio receivers developed by engineer Otto Griessing at the request of Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda under the Nazi regime. The goal of the Volksempfänger program was to make radio reception technology affordable to the general public. Goebbels was aware of the enormous propaganda potential of this relatively new medium and therefore believed that widespread availability of receivers was very important.

have happened to you if it weren't for good old Theodor? You are luckier than you are smart. Actually, I don't know what he sees in you. I wouldn't trade you for a cone of Ein Pfennig Riesen from Storck.<sup>10</sup>

- I know...

- Don't get all mushy, it's called politics.

A nostalgic smile appeared on Wainwright's lips and Waldo crossed himself, adding:

- Now we should all pray.

- Who knows, maybe tomorrow, some greenie boys will pray for us? Added Müntefering.

\*\*\*

On February 19 they leave the train in Poltava and change to the cars that came with them on the lorries from France. "Totenkopf" along with the divisions "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" and "Das Reich" is subordinated to the command of the SS armored corps. Tanks and lighter combat vehicles are the first to leave the transshipment point, they are followed by a multitude of men and equipment. For the next three nights, they stay in a tiny town hidden under a blanket of fresh snow. The locals acted friendly. Holger's men, with the exception of Jörg, were reserved, but within the bounds of propriety. Volker, whom everyone without exception thought was the last turd, gave his entire allowance of chocolate to the children. The soldiers said that he had

10 In 1934 Hugo Oberwelland, invented the first German brand of candy: "Storck 1 Pfennig RIESEN", each individually wrapped. Previously sold by weight, these nameless candies gave way to Storck 1 Pfennig RIESEN. The development of the first hard candy brand led to the growth of the company. Three years later, 71 people worked at Storck and products were shipped to most regions of Germany.

built a small igloo, in which the local boys immediately set up their headquarters.

In the coming days, the sound of blizzards and gusts of wind were deafened by the rumble of cannons. The ground is trembling underfoot, the "Totenkopf" troops in battle formation, like a well-oiled machine, are advancing towards Kharkov, until one evening, just before nightfall, a Blitz with people on board breaks down, followed by another and another. No one knows what happened. Most likely, they screwed up in the workshops in France, during the preparation of the machines, or it was frost. Either way, the trucks were pushed to the side of the road and the SS-men were ordered to wait. Sauber, driving the rover with Behrendt and Wainwright in the back seat, passed the trucks, honking and cursing in unison. Holger, recognizing his own men, ordered him to stop, got out, and called Paul.

- Get out "foul mouth"! We'll stay with the troops while Waldo tells the heroic Fritz to send new cars.

Saying this he looked meaningfully at Chief Sauber.

- Yes, Hauptsturmführer!

Waldo shouted, jumped into the jeep, and drove away as fast as he could. In ten minutes the rest of Behrendt's men appeared. Volker, standing in the middle of the road with a flashlight, ordered them to park next to the broken vehicles. Chief Egon took the recruits out to dig dikes, set up lookouts, and ordered the chauffeurs to start the catalytic stoves they had equipped in the cabs.

As it grew dark, the weary Behrendt lay down in the cab of the broken-down Blitz. The journey and the evening mishaps gave him a hard time, so no wonder he soon fell asleep. Hard to say how long he slumbered, maybe an hour or half, certainly not as much as he needed. A pat on his frowning face woke him up.

- Get up...

Paul whispered.

- Someone approaching.

He opened his eyes. The dawn was breaking. A milky gray fog swept up around them. Silhouettes on horseback appeared on a barely visible curve of the sodden road, not far from the tree line.

- It is Ivan!

Holger shouted. At the same moment, as calm as on a morning stroll, Müntefering gave the command:

- Fire!

The MG42s<sup>11</sup> lined up on the ramparts cackled in the fog, while a barely awakened echo, as if from a rehearsal, treated them with a horse's neigh. Rider and mount fell before the forest wall. Suddenly, the overcast morning sky lit up with a flare. From behind the dark wall of trees came the deafening rumble of cannons.

- Take cover!

Paul shouted. The soldiers ran to the sides, looking for any kind of hiding spot. The first shells fell behind the camp, but the next ones hit right in the middle, smashing two broken trucks. Near the forest silhouettes on horses appeared again, but this time more. From between the trees came a T-70.<sup>12</sup>

- Russian scouts have spotted us! But it is a larger force. MG's! Fire!

Shouted Chief Egon. Meanwhile, Bardulf Vogel, until 1936-a shopkeeper from Offenburg and now one of the best artillery

11 The Maschinengewehr 42 (MG 42) is a German universal machine gun of World War II.

12 T-70 - light tank of Soviet production of World War II produced in 1942-1943, the third among the Soviet tanks participating in the war in terms of the number of units produced after the T-34 and T-26. On its modified chassis was constructed self-propelled gun SU-76 and its most numerous development version SU-76M.

training instructors within the battalion - had ordered the recently received 120-millimeter mortars to be spread out and fired at the ridge in case Ivan wanted to poke his nose out from behind the trees. Volker pulled up to the shaft „Anklopf“<sup>13</sup> and calmly waited for the tankers to make a mistake. Meanwhile, the guns from behind the woods rang out a second time. The tank also opened fire with its 45mm cannon, destroying two more wagons. Fired upon by Müntefering, the cavalymen retreated into the woods. But the movement at the edge did not stop. Mortars rang out, judging by the strength of the explosion - 82 mm. It was getting quite bright, there was no trace of the fog. Suddenly the cannonade from behind the forest stopped. The tank

13 3.7 cm PaK 36 (Panzerabwehrkanone 36)-German anti-tank cannon of 37 mm caliber. Developed since 1925 in Rheinmetall plants, it entered serial production in 1928 as one of the most modern anti-tank guns in the world. The production was accelerated in 1933, and in 1936 the cannon received the designation PaK 35/36. It made its combat debut during the Spanish Civil War and proved highly effective against the lightly armored tanks of the time. As a 3.7 cm KwK 36 L45 it was also used in early models of PzKpfw III tank and other German vehicles. A projectile fired from the PaK 36 from a distance of 500 m penetrated approximately 30 mm of armor (at a plate angle of 30°). In the September campaign, the cannon was still quite effective, but already in 1940, during Operation Fall Gelb, it was unable to penetrate the thick armor of French and British tanks (e.g. Matilda Mk II, Char B1 or Somua S-35). However, it continued to serve in the German army until the attack on the Soviet Union, when it proved completely powerless against T-34 tanks. It then earned the nickname "Anklopf" - "knocker". It was replaced by the 5 cm PaK 38 cannon, but was still used to a limited extent in 1945.

moved forward, followed by a squadron of Soviet cavalry and infantry. The mortars were still hitting the center of the camp. It must be admitted that they shot very swiftly. But Bardulf was not indebted to them. Jörg's artillerymen waited another moment and with surgical precision destroyed the advancing T-70. After a few minutes, Vogel's boys neutralized the Soviet mortar batteries. It turned out that the "Totenkopf" gunners were also able to shoot quite swiftly. Müntefering and his MG42 literally wiped out the cavalry and infantry. Holger felt sorry for the wounded animals. So, he summoned some fresh recruits, and together they went to finish off the dying mounts writhing in the snow. The sight was terrible. Dead Russians and their mares like overturned pawns on a chessboard trapped in frozen pools of blood. The neighing of horses, the groans of wounded Ivans, a burning tank, and the terrified eyes of a semi-combusted Tanker who tried to get out of the blazing machine and hovered on the edge of an open hatch. Behrendt approached him at arm's length and, looking into his blindingly white, against the background of his burnt face, fear-filled eyes - fired into his head. The forced volunteers, shot at the throwing, smeared in their own blood horses, and cried out like babies. Above the battlefield, steam rose from the nostrils of wounded animals and out of the mouths of dying soldiers. Holger had forbidden to shoot people. The boys were to shorten the suffering of the mounts and leave the wounded Ivans to die in the cold. Only when there was complete silence did it occur to Holger that somewhere in front of them another fight also took place. The rumble of the cannons and the rattle of the machine guns all blended together and faded into the sound of the battle they were fighting. The sound wandered in the fog and it was impossible to locate it. Suddenly, three Ju-87s appeared over the forest, and two



tanks Pz.Kpfw. IV and Leichter Schützenpanzerwagen<sup>14</sup> rolled out from behind the curve of the road, as well as several captured STZ-5<sup>15</sup> tractors in the colors and with the characteristic division markings. The planes dropped their bombs and flew away, a column of smoke rose from behind the trees. On top of one of the tanks sat Chief Sauber and munched on a sausage.

- And the fear is over! We're here now. From now on you all are safe. Hearing his words Paul burst into laughter, hooted with a dozen if not more voices.

- The tank commander and Sauber reported to Behrendt. After a short conversation, it turned out, that during the night assault the Division had driven a wedge in the enemy defense, flanking his considerable forces. By a fortunate coincidence, the Hauptsturmführer and his men stood in the way of Soviet reconnaissance units that were looking for a way out of the rear of the advancing Germans during the night. The tractors took in tow those wagons that could still be salvaged, the dead were piled on the back of the last

14 The Sd.Kfz. 250 (German: Sonderkraftfahrzeug 250; 'special motor vehicle') was a light armoured half-track, very similar in appearance to the larger Hanomag-designed Sd.Kfz. 251, and built by the DEMAG firm, for use by Nazi Germany in World War II. Most variants were open-topped and had a single access door in the rear. Sd. Kfz 250 was adopted in 1939 as an addition to the standard half-track vehicle. However, delays in production meant that the first vehicle did not appear until mid-1941.

15 STZ-5 (Russian: CT3-5) - military medium tracked artillery and transport tractor of Soviet design from World War II, produced by the Stalingrad Tractor Factory (STZ). Produced in 1937-1942, it was the most numerous artillery tractor of special design serving in the Red Army during the war.

working Blitz, the wounded were packed onto tanks and into a transporter, and the company moved through the fearful Russian whiteness. Only when they had passed the curve of the road and the forest slope climbing to the ridge of the hill stretching into infinity, did their eyes see a view taken straight from Pieter Bruegel's "Triumph of Death".

In a huge valley, squeezed like a bubbling stew in a cauldron, long columns of vehicles and heavy equipment are piling up, moving chaotically, simultaneously east and west. Tanks ram trucks, self-propelled guns, and smaller cars dance on the ice colliding with sleds. Terrified people and animals in panic and terror are looking for a way out of this deadly trap. But there is no rescue for them. A murderous fire falls on their heads from the humps of the nearby hills. The SS-men hold competitions to see who can destroy more equipment, who will kill more horses, and who will break the record for the most Ivans laid down in a single burst. Every now and then a laugh breaks out and the sound of ovations and applause echoes into the distance. In front of Behrendt and his men, thousands of Russians lay dying. A hail of artillery and mortar fire, rounds of heavy machine guns dropping entire squads, and direct fire from anti-aircraft guns carnage people and livestock. All resistance is superfluous, yet a few T-34 tanks try to break free from the barrage, but after a while, they all go up in flames. Soon the slaughter comes to an end. Wainwright, pointing to the ruby-scarlet, shimmering in the morning sunlight, explains to the newly arrived recruits:

- This was no longer a battle, but the culling of a commandless, panic-stricken enemy. Soak up this sight, remember it well, as it is rare nowadays. Ivan knows how to fight and at any moment you may find yourself in the position of those below.

- Enough!

Behrendt interjected. Paul nodded and whispered in Holger's ear.

- You know I'm right. Tomorrow it will be us.

Being the anniversary of Napoleon's escape from Elba on 26 February, Behrendt's special company was in the vicinity of Orelka. The marching column got overtaken by a motorcyclist who signaled for a pass, and a moment later Obergruppenführer Eicke's car chased them away. Nearby, on a flat field, a liaison aircraft Fieseler Fi 156 Storch<sup>16</sup> was waiting for him, ready to take off. In view of the repeated attempts to establish contact with the lost armored regiment, "Papa" decided to find it himself. Practically in front of Holger's eye the plane falls down, shot down by the Soviet anti-aircraft defense. A special assault group, led by Wainwright, sets out for the site of the fall, eventually returning after dark with three bodies: the pilot, the adjutant, and "Papa."

Looking at the charred corpse of Eicke, Behrendt knew that nothing would be the same again as before the plane door slammed. Oh no! He felt no grief, no tears rushed to his eye. The death of the commander concerned him insofar as, during his lifetime, he could benefit from being one of the "praetorians". Or maybe Eicke just liked him. Honestly? It neither warmed nor chilled him. He realized that hard times were coming and Volker and Wainwright were suddenly an unbearable burden. In principle, he had two

16 The Fieseler Fi 156 Storch (English: Stork) was a small German liaison aircraft built by Fieseler before and during World War II. Production continued in other countries into the 1950s for the private market. It was notable for its excellent STOL performance and low stall speed of 50 km/h (31 mph).[2] French-built later variants often appear at air shows.

choices: cut the rope on which they were hanging and calmly climb up without any ballast or fall with them. Alternatively, he could think about changing the route, but then they would probably follow him.

\*\*\*

In the last days of June, the heroic Fritz posted Holger to a forward combat position. It was an outpost, or if you prefer, an observation redoubt biting almost deep into Ivan's position, which he set up opposite, in the burned-out area of a tiny village, some 500 meters in a straight line, behind an overflowing swamp, overgrown with birch groves here and there. Behrendt's lookout was situated on a slight bulge of land sloping gently towards the Russian positions. It was an excellent observation point but difficult to maintain. Holger learned that the very first night.

Barely had they begun to take up their previously prepared positions, Sigi "Kopfhörer"<sup>17</sup> ran up to Wainwright and relayed Knöchlein's order:

- Obersturmführer! Sturmbannführer ordered to capture the tongue... You are to approach the Soviets and kidnap, preferably an NCO or officer for interrogation.

Chief Egon, who was carefully setting up machine gun positions in a semicircle, as usual, looked at Behrendt and commented.

- He wants to get rid of us! The bastard keeps sending us on suicide missions. The delegation to this place is no coincidence, and now Paul is to bring a Russian for a chat?

- You think I don't know that? What am I supposed to do? Refuse an order?

- I know how to do it.

Volker said.

---

17 Ger. Handset, earpiece.

- What the fuck? How about the way you handled things in Zhytomyr, psycho?

Furious, Behrendt moved towards Jörg. Fortunately, Waldo stood in his way.

- Hauptsturmführer! It's enough that the Russians and "Dolly" are trying to kill us. Let's spare each other the assassination attempts. Please?

- You're right. And you, Volker, keep your mouth shut! There will come a day when Waldo won't be around.

- As you wish, Your Lordship.

He withdrew in a servile pose, looked at Paul, and said:

- Don't worry "Blunt Tongue" I'll keep you covered. I will go with you, if "Lord H" agrees?

- Go, go, maybe for once we'll have some use for your murderous tendencies.

After dark Wainwright, Volker, and four more hoodlums, well camouflaged and smeared in mud, set off towards the Soviet positions. Without difficulty, they took a safe path through the strip of minefield stretching from the first clump of birches to the front of the redoubt. They were close enough that they could easily listen to the laughter and conversation in the Russian trenches. It suddenly seemed to Paul that he heard a familiar voice.

- Volker... can you hear it? It's "Boria", I'll recognize that barking of his everywhere.

- Paul, stop it. You're obsessed with him. He's dead. He drowned in the swamp during the "butchers" attack.

- He didn't drown, he just ran off.

Wainwright got angry.

- Silence!

One of the hoodlums reprimanded them.

- Let's go.

Paul ordered. Meanwhile, Müntefering, who was standing at the head of the redoubt, was watching the situation through his binoculars.

- Ooo! Something happened.

The salvos of gunfire, the explosions of grenades, the flashes from the barrels squeezing through the darkness like a meteorite through the dark sky - all this suddenly shattered the apparent calm of the night.

- Лови вошь!<sup>18</sup>

It could be heard from the Soviet positions.

- Эх, сука! Изменник! Предатель!<sup>19</sup>

Then only screams of agony interrupted by MP40 bursts.

After half a minute the Russian machine guns started firing, accompanied by screams and single volleys of shots. A rocket lit up the night sky, followed by another one. It became almost as bright as during the day. In the glow of the flares and the streaks from the illuminating rounds, Holger could clearly see Wainwright and his men tearing through the swamp. Maybe 20 to 50 meters behind them, the Russians were racing, howling with rage. Mortars rang out from behind them, and the wing fire of the Maxims<sup>20</sup> slashed the young birch trees between which they were slipping. Wainwright ran first, behind him Volker carrying a wounded Russian on his back, some Ivan with an accordion under his arm, and apparently a young girl with a nurse's armband on her shoulder. In the background two hoodlums, one of whom fell under a hail of bullets, and the other evidently wounded slowed down more and more, until he fell into the clutches of the pursuing group. As Paul and his men approached a safe distance, Chief Egon doused the swamp with barrage fire, stopping the Soviet pursuit. Some of the Russians were killed in the minefield and some by Muntefering shells.

---

18 Russ. Get the lice!

19 Russ. Oh bitch! Sneak! Traitor!

20 Maxim wz. 1910 (7.62 станковый пулемет системы Максима образца 1910 года) is a Russian/Soviet heavy machine gun. One of the many versions of the Hiram Maxim machine gun.

When they fell behind the rampart of the redoubt, it turned out that Wainwright was right, and the voice he heard actually belonged to Boria. Volker, on his own hump, carried the lieutenant, literally dragged out of bed, and in the course of the hand-to-hand combat managed to free a young nurse who had been abducted in the morning from the ambulance that had been shelled. The lieutenant was immediately escorted back to Fritz, the girl taken to the dressing station, and Holger took care of Boria. It turned out that the whole action would not stand the slightest chance of success if not for Paul's minion, who, having met his master and Jörg, failed to raise the alarm. In spite of everything, the joy of a successful outing did not last long, as within a quarter of an hour a hail of artillery shells fell on the advanced lookout from the direction of the Soviet positions, and until morning, like a wounded bull, Ivan, wave after wave attacked their fortified positions. The persistence of the Russians could not be explained by offended pride. These were self-destructive attacks conducted against logic through a minefield, straight under the murderous fire of MG42s, and later also of light anti-aircraft guns Flakvierling 38, caliber 20mm<sup>21</sup>, which, to the defenders' delight, were brought by Chief Waldo. It looked as if the Soviets wanted to pull the thorn out of the

---

21 The Flak 30 (Flugzeugabwehrkanone 30) and the improved Flak 38 were 20 mm anti-aircraft guns used by various German forces during World War II. It was not only the primary German light anti-aircraft gun, but also the most extensively produced German artillery weapon throughout the war. Many different models were produced, most notably the Flakvierling 38, which combined four Flak 38 guns on a single carriage. As later practice proved, this type of cannon proved to be a very effective weapon against infantry.

bleeding eye at all costs, as that seemed to be Holger's redoubt for them.

Knöchlein made no bones about his delight over the "night's hunting." Volker received a written commendation from him, and as Behrendt's secret sources in the command reported, Fritz also requested that the Unterscharführer be decorated. After 'Papa's death, Jörg's stock skyrocketed impressively, while Wainwright and Holger went downhill. The following days bring more furious Soviet attacks. Paul is given increasingly bizarre assignments, such as evacuating a German spy from the headquarters of a Soviet armored corps stationed deep behind the front lines. In the course of the task, it turns out that the headquarters has moved to an unknown location, and a special unit of Soviet counterintelligence is mounting a manhunt for Wainwright and his men. On July 4, the anniversary of the funeral of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, a few minutes after nightfall, they managed to get back behind the redoubt ramparts. Out of the ten-person detachment, only Paul and the two hoodlums survived. At the same moment, a motor courier reached the company, ordering them to move at once to the battalion's positions. They carry out the order immediately. On the spot, they learn that tomorrow morning, precisely at 03:00, the long-awaited summer offensive will begin, preceded by an artillery barrage and an airstrike on the Soviet defensive positions along with their supply lines. At the precisely announced time, the festival of fire and smoke begins. Grey ribbons of rockets are flowing over the front line as if it was Indian summer over the morning meadow. The roar of the cannons makes the ground tremble, which seems to move away from under the feet in a righteous reaction of fear. Russians answer with a salvo. Squadrons of Stukas appear in the sky. Their bombs destroyed Soviet battery positions, previously identified concentration points



of heavy equipment, fortified infantry positions, and command posts. Messerschmitt Me 110 destroyers follow the Stukas, and attack the tanks, which burst into flames, releasing strands of thick black smoke into the sky. Next, come the Heinkels, escorted by Me 109s circling like hornets. Over 1000 planes take to the skies, showing the astonished Russians the power of the German Luftwaffe. Subsequently, come the Tigers<sup>22</sup> and the new Panthers<sup>23</sup> - all that steel mass cutting deep into Ivan's positions like a hot knife into a stick of butter. They receive the order to attack. The limited enemy troops put up a makeshift resistance. A puzzled Holger calls out to Paul:

- It looks as if Ivan gave up the rear in advance, retreating to the second and third line of defense.
- It crossed my mind too. Especially after the strange coincidence about the evacuation of the brave spy.

---

22 he Tiger I (About this soundlisten (help·info)) was a German heavy tank of World War II that operated beginning in 1942 in Africa and in the Soviet Union, usually in independent heavy tank battalions. It gave the German Army its first armoured fighting vehicle that mounted the 8.8 cm KwK 36 gun (derived from the 8.8 cm Flak 36). 1,347 were built between August 1942 and August 1944.[10] After August 1944, production of the Tiger I was phased out in favour of the Tiger II.

23 The Panther is a German medium tank deployed during World War II on the Eastern and Western Fronts in Europe from mid-1943 to the war's end in 1945. It had the ordnance inventory designation of Sd.Kfz. 171. It was designated as the Panzerkampfwagen V Panther until 27 February 1944, when Hitler ordered that the Roman numeral "V" be deleted. Contemporary English-language reports sometimes refer to it as the "Mark V".

From time to time they encounter stronger points of resistance, but they soon overcome these as well. Boria misleads the bunker crew blocking the road taken by Holger's men, allowing them to pass without losses. Towards evening they reach their destination and immediately dig in. Fritz assigns them widely scattered positions, hardly tenable in case of a counterattack. The resourceful Waldo calls for sappers, who at least partially secure them with a minefield. Behrendt is called back to headquarters again. When he returns he orders Wainwright and Chief Egon to assemble two platoons and scout the enemy positions along the line of advance.

- Kursk is still a long way off and the road from Belgorod is swarming with Ivans. Fritz took it as a point of honor to finish us off.

Müntefering complained.

- The only thing we can do now is to spite the bastard and do his job as best we can.

Paul added. They set off immediately after consulting the maps. Chief Egon's group went out first since their route was longer. Wainwright waited about 20 minutes and also set off. They left their helmets, gas masks, backpacks, shovels, and the rest of the unnecessary equipment at the company post, taking only the P-ems and a couple of grenades per head. The night was exceptionally dark, with rare glimpses of stars, heavy storm clouds drifted across the onyx sky, offering them a veil of impenetrable darkness as a cover. They walk in a few columns in a goose step, keeping their distance from each other. The only sounds that accompany them are the rustling of the tall grasses and the breathing of their comrade in front and behind them. From time to time Paul glances at his "Busch"<sup>24</sup> illuminating it with the faint red light from his

---

24 German compass with bakalite frame manufactured by Busch Rathenow. Rathenower Optische Werke (ROW) was one of the most important manufacturers of lenses

signal flashlight. They must stick to the established route, otherwise, the whole expedition will end for them by sudden death at best. Death is the least of their worries. Reports circulating for a long time about the cruelty of Ivan, especially to the captured SS soldiers, radicalize the attitudes of the young boys. Germans hardly ever fight to the death, but lately few want to yield, so if a Russian falls into their hands, they ruthlessly thank him for the atrocities he certainly committed against one of their fallen colleagues. The characteristic scent of pork fat and machorka was in the air. This is a sign that Ivan is near. They reach the line of the road leading from Belgorod to Kursk. On the embankment of the road, they can see two lying shadows and something that looks like a machine gun with a disc magazine.

- It reeks of booze.

---

and other optical instruments in the DDR. It was founded in 1801 as the Königlich privilegierte optische Industrie-Anstalt (Royal Privileged Optical Industry Company) by Father Johann Heinrich August Duncker and Samuel Christoph Wagener, head of the industrial school of the Rathenow garrison. During World War II, the company worked entirely for the armaments industry. For example, it produced rangefinders for artillery and large binoculars (10 × 80) for detecting aircraft. Emil Busch AG products bear the manufacturer codes cxn and krq. War production also came from the factory's Budapest branch.[8] Emil Busch A. G. also employed forced laborers during this period. An external branch of the Berlin-Lichtenberg Prison for Women and Youth operated at the company. From 1943, the Carl Zeiss Foundation became the majority shareholder. The production facilities were largely destroyed shortly before the end of the war.

Boria comes closer, checks and waves as a sign that they are safe. At the DP-27<sup>25</sup> rifle rests two drunken boys. Before Wainwright had time to react one of the hoodlums noiselessly cut their throats.

- Why did you do that?

- They were Russians.

Peter Ziegler, son of the headmaster of a school in Linz, Austria, replied with contempt in his voice. He volunteered in 1940 as soon as he was old enough. He severed relations with his family since, as he said, his father had spoken very ill of the Nazis and had never belonged to the party. So he felt no connection with them whatsoever, after all, a family like that is a disgrace... Zaigler was not a psychopathic murderer in Volker type, but in his opinion, any Slavic outcast or Jewish scab did not deserve to breathe the same air as decent Germans.

- Now we have to hide them and take their weapons. What did you do that for?

Paul was angry.

- Haha... Nur ein toter Russe ist ein guter Russe.<sup>26</sup>

Laughing, with a rusty, grating accent, Boria chuckled.

- Shut up! You keep repeating like a parrot.

They are now moving parallel on both sides of the road. It's still very dark, they keep on pacing the area in front of them,

25 Soviet manual machine gun developed by Vasily A. Diegtiarow, also designated DP wz 27 (DP-27) or DP wz 28. The name DP is an abbreviation for Diegtiarow Piechotnyj (Russian: Diegtiarow infantry machine gun). This rifle was one of the first types of weapons developed after 1917 in the Soviet Union. The prototype was built in 1926. It was adopted into the armament of the Red Army as a basic hand-held machine gun in 1927[2] and used by it with great success until the end of World War II.

26 Ger. Only a dead Russian is a good Russian

like a blind man crossing the road, stopping every few minutes to listen. The sounds are getting clearer, after a while one can already distinguish the whirr of the engines of trucks and tanks. The first conversations in Russian could be heard. Narrow threads of light from headlights illuminate the area. In case of an encounter, Boria is supposed to talk them down; there is a good chance that in the dark Ivan will take the hoodlums for his own and they will sneak through undetected. Finally, they reach a large intersection, in the middle of which two Russian women from the traffic service are standing, using flashlights and colorful flags, trying to control an overflowing river of T-34 tanks.<sup>27</sup>

- We've seen enough. Let's go back.

Wainwright gave the signal to leave and his men as usual obeyed the silent order. They reached their own even with the dawn. The heroic Fritz could not hide his disappointment at seeing Paul. Everyone eagerly waited for Müntefering's return, but despite the passing of time, the Chief did not show up. Knöchlein, unable to verify the information obtained by the hoodlums, informs the staff that the mission has failed. Wainwright protests, but his opinion is not taken into consideration.

---

27 The T-34, a Soviet medium tank produced from 1941 to 1958, was a surprise to the Germans when it appeared on the front lines of World War II because of its large cannon caliber and armor thickness. It had a reputation as a vehicle whose use significantly influenced the course of the war. Initially produced at the Kharkiv Komintern Steam Engine Factory, it was the basis of armament of the Soviet armored forces in 1941-1945. During the war it was the armored vehicle produced in the largest number of units. It was also the second most produced tank of all time - after its successor, the T-54/55 series tank. In 1996, the T-34 was still in use by 27 countries of the world.

After less than two hours of rest, at 08:00 sharp, the Division moves into the attack. This time everything is done by surprise, without artillery preparation. After sporadic fighting and with little enemy resistance, they reach the intersection where at night two women guided the traffic. There is no sign of the tanks or the girls, but in a roadside ditch, they discover the bodies of mutilated colleagues, including Chief Egon with his eyes, gouged out and his tongue cut out. Some of the soldiers are naked, others only in their underwear. All are missing shoes and personal belongings.

- So now you know why I butchered those two at night.

Zaigler looked at Paul as if what had happened to Müntefering was his fault. Wainwright looked away and didn't answer.

- We must bury them.

He announced while breaking off part of the Chief's dog tag. After a brief soldier's funeral and marking the burial site on a map, they continued on their way. The next two days they trampled on Ivan, who kept eluding them, limiting operations only to delaying. On the third day, they stopped abruptly. Holger, upon returning from headquarters, announced that tomorrow they would take part in a major armored operation as a mobile landing party on tank armor. For half the night Soviet long-range artillery and rocket launchers pounded at them, and in the morning the "butchers" showed up. Two Il-2s fell on their heads after a successful Flugabwehrjungs1 action. Tanks camouflaged as haystacks, clumps of trees, and bushes, fortunately, did not suffer. Before the Sun climbed to the top of its journey that day, the awaited order came:

- "Mount on!"

Holger and part of Müntefering's team jump into the Panther. Next to him, on various machines, ride Wainwright, Volker, Sauber, and the hoodlums. At the roar of the engines, a

moving wall of steel moves towards the hump of the hill, behind which stretches a plain as flat as a tomb slab. Far in the distance, one can see Russians hurrying to meet them. The Germans are speeding up, the silhouettes of T-34s can be recognized from afar, and suddenly the armored plank stands still, the turrets turn, taking aim at the enemy, and the cannonade begins. Ivan returns fire. The first tanks go up in flames. The ammunition in the hit vehicles explodes. Heavy, pungent smoke, like a mourning procession, stretches up into the blue sky. They are moving again. The Russians attempt to fire on the march, but it is very inaccurate. After a few dozen meters the Tigers, Panthers, and Panzers again halt. Another salvo and the Russians reply. Silhouettes of soldiers can be seen on the Ivan machines. On-board machine guns open fire at them. Ivan responds back. Ricochets kill a lot of people. Missiles explode at a very close range. Behrendt sees hurricane fire and shrapnel literally sweep his SS-men off the tanks. The armored "Totenkopf" wrench is surrounded by a mantle of smoke and fire. From the wings the artillery is beating, both battle groups heading towards each other have probably already entered the scope of their own guns. Overhead, Stukas fly very low, their BK 3.71<sup>28</sup> anti-tank guns destroying the enemy tanks; from behind the horizon line, the "butchers" appear, with Focke-Wulfs and Me 109s

28 The Bordkanone 3.7 (BK 3.7) ("3.7 deck gun") was a German 3.7 cm (1.46 in) anti-tank automatic gun of World War II, based on the earlier 3.7 cm (1.46 in) 3.7 cm Flak 18 produced by Rheinmetall. It was mounted on Luftwaffe aircraft such as Junkers Ju 87 G-1 and G-2; Henschel Hs 129B-2/R3; Messerschmitt Bf 110G-2/R1-3; Junkers Ju 88P-2 or P-3 and others. The cannon could be mounted under the wings or fuselage of aircraft as stand-alone gun pods with 12-round magazines. It fired APCR (tungsten-core) anti-tank ammunition or high explosive shells at 160 rounds per minute.

throwing themselves at them. Ivan calls for help from the La-5<sup>29</sup> and the American handouts in the form of Bell P-39 Airacobra fighters. The battle in the air parallels that on the ground. The tanks accelerate to a speed at which no man can hang on to their armor. Holger and his men jump down and run behind the machines. There are duels between the armored vehicles at a very short distance. Machines that ran out of ammunition ram enemy units. Mortars enter the battle, the shrapnel from their grenades kills anyone who gets in their way. It makes no difference if you are lying down or standing up. The mortar can find you anywhere due to the very low, trailing path of the shrapnel. From between the wreckage of the steel giants, in the smoke and fire there comes a thunderous wave, the cry from thousands of throats - "Uraaa! Hand-to-hand combat begins. The Russians use long bayonets with crossed heads - an awful weapon! Soldiers are very afraid of it. Holger takes out his Browning P-35, which is his basic weapon in short-distance fighting, next to a saper spade and a fahrtmesser. Some Ivan tries to strangle him with hands the size of loaves of bread, but Volker drives him to the gates of hell. Communists and Jews are not allowed into heaven, and there are plenty of them in this country, so one can assume with a high degree of probability that this half-giant was either one or the other, and if so, he is already frying in hell. A scream, a cannonade of tanks' cannons, the explosions of mortar grenades, a terrifying howling of diving Junkers, and between all this,

29 The Lavochkin La-5 (Лавочкин Ла-5) was a Soviet fighter aircraft of World War II. It was a development and refinement of the LaGG-3, replacing the earlier model's inline engine with the much more powerful Shvetsov ASh-82 radial engine. During its time in service, it was one of the Soviet Air Force's most capable types of warplane, able to fight German designs on an equal footing.



gunshots and rattling rapid killing machines. The armored fist pushes forward, literally wiping out the small town and its defending crew. At the same time, somewhere over the hill, with incredible speed from many points at once, like a swarm of arrows fired on St. Crispin's Day, 528 years ago by the English archers at Agincourt<sup>30</sup>, now, hundreds if not thousands of rockets making infernal sounds will fall on the heads of the Russians, leaving not the slightest sign of life in the blast zone.

- Is this the miracle weapon that has been talked about for some time now? Will this allow us to finally achieve what we have been fighting for since 1941?

Pondered Behrendt, jumping over a rampart of live fire. Above his head, like silt in clear water, gray braids of fired rockets dissolved away and were immediately replaced by new ones. Smoke was biting into his eye. Not seeing much, he stumbled every now and then over the bodies of the fallen. He did not look back, he ran and shot until ammunition ran out. In a moment he got to the charnel ground of some village. Tanks stood still, streaks of rockets, slowly, like snow on a tin roof under the sunlight, receded from the sky showing its natural blue, against which yellow-grey Me 109s were circling like vultures. Volker and Waldo came running up to him, dragging the wounded Wainwright behind them on a camouflage cloth. Hundreds of tanks were burning in the field beyond them. The village, seemed like an incinerated black hole, burned, ragged bodies of Russians lay everywhere. The pain and horror on the faces of these people

30 The Battle of Agincourt was an English victory in the Hundred Years' War. It took place on 25 October 1415 near Azincourt, in northern France. The unexpected English victory against the numerically superior French army boosted English morale and prestige, crippled France and started a new period of English dominance in the war.

said everything about their last moments. For the first time since they had been in Russia, Holger felt sorry for the Ivans. What had happened to them here should not have happened to anyone, or to any living being. They had died in horrible agonies, burned alive or torn apart by a direct blast, and though it was hard to imagine, some of them had suffered an even worse fate. Many were dead despite having no visible injuries. Behrend and his men had never seen anything like this before, although they had heard stories of fellow members of "Das Reich". If someone was close enough to the rocket impact, but not in its direct range, the sonic shock wave and very high temperature caused such a person's lungs and other internal organs to explode. The outcome of which was a horrifying and unimaginably painful death.

There were many other battles such as this one, by mid-July the number of troops decreased by one second, the tanks burned down, and the young boys, full of hope and life, fell into an eternal sleep under the blanket of Mother Russia.

People think of war as honor and a battle uproar, swift strikes, strategic movements of great armies, fighting the enemy, victories, and defeats... Well, nothing could be further away from the truth. War is fear and anticipation. Continuous hours, weeks, months, and years. War is filth and lice. Postmaster taken by flames, helpless Englishmen against the barn wall. It has the face of that old soldier who decided to end his life on hearing of the death of his wife and daughters. It is the trembling hands of Untersturmführer Wenk and pieces of his face scattered across the communications bunker. It is the blood that runs from the mouths of Soviet soldiers whose lungs have exploded. There's nothing in it of the kind the newspapers write about and the radio announcers tell us. It is the worst, most horrible thing that man has come up with in the short history of his

existence. Of the phrase "Blut und Ehre", only "blut" fits the descriptive definition of the term. "'Ehre' fits the war like a knife fits the liver. Anyone touched by it bears its mark. The world is full of maimed, disabled souls. Life, as they knew before, can never return. No matter how hard they try, what passion and enthusiasm it takes to start over, they're doomed to fail. There are things and issues that simply cannot be put back together. A broken, patched reality becomes from now on just a powdered dead body, only a distant and grotesque imitation of what they have lost forever. The feeling in Holger's soul can only be compared to looking into the face of a dead mother. It seems to be the face of the same person, but something is missing. There are not enough words in the vocabulary of an educated person to describe this overwhelming sensation, which takes away the urge of being. Life fills, completes, illuminates, it is multidimensional. Life heals. And death? Well, you know... Perdition is the only and seemingly most accurate association with war that reason can agree on. Perdition, the final bill for the rest of the lives of future generations...

On July 16, burned, gouged out like wild boars by shotgun blasts, dirty and mangy but alive, Behrendt, Volker and Chief Sauber arrived at the military hospital in Zhytomyr. Inga and the girls of Mrs. Lieselotte took care of them. Above all, they devoted special efforts to Jörg, to whom more than one of them owed their lives. No one spoke about the events involving Gerver. It was a kind of taboo for the characters involved. After the visit of his tormentor, the Obersturmbannführer fled the town and was never heard from again. Rumor has it he is believed to remain in a special military hospital, where soldiers are treated for combat shock. No one has ever confirmed this information, but no one has denied it either. One thing is for sure, Gerver was probably the only person on the entire earth to have

encountered Volker's knife and survived. So if he even feigned trench neurosis, it was the best he could do in this case., as surely Volker must seem to him an unholy force that may return any moment soon. No one bothered with this miserable man anymore, and even Behrendt in the course of time gave up investigating the truth. In the end, Volker, although not fully understanding his own role, became a "part of that force that always wills the evil and always produces the good". Perhaps not exactly as in Goethe or Bulgakov, but nevertheless, he turned out to be the judge, punishing the injustice and wickedness of a man to whom no human nor divine laws seemed to apply. After dressing their wounds, washing, disinfecting, and shaving, they went to a room with a pleasant surprise awaiting them. On one of the many occupied beds lay, Paul, clean, shaven, and in good spirits. He was on crutches, but like everyone else in the infirmary, he could consider himself the darling of fate, for he had made his way in one piece between the grindstones of history, taking part in the greatest armored battle in the history of arms. The world will someday forget the reasons for this war, mistake the crimes for merit, and put the criminals on the same footing as the victims - this happens to every conflict. Time is inexorable in its passage and no one has yet resisted its influence. Nobody and nothing, neither the victim nor the perpetrator. As the centuries pass, everything and everyone will turn into a fable, closer to a fairy tale than to the life from which it sprang. People will forget almost every detail, except that once, far, far away in the east took place the greatest armored battle in the history of wars. And he took part in it and survived.

In September, after being discharged from the hospital, they were awarded a furlough. Mrs. Rita took Holger and Inga to Kolberg where they spent two wonderful weeks. The women did everything they could to make

Behrendt, at least for a while, feel like a man, an ordinary man at the side of the woman he loved. But Holger is no longer there, at least not the one they both wanted. That boy died on September 1, 1939, under the ramparts of the post office. At Kolberg came Hauptsturmführer Behrendt. A vicious Nazi, with a deep-rooted belief in the Führer and ultimate victory. A soldier for whom terms such as "ordinary man" or "average person" was a thorn in his flesh. No... He could not afford to be average! Ordinary people work in factories, bake bread, sew shoes. He was an instrument of war, a messenger of death. He shaped and sculpted the future of generations. On his shoulders rested the fate of German girls and boys. He plowed the earth leaving the furrows of war behind., fertilizing it with the blood of enemies, so that tomorrow a new, even more, glorious Reich could grow on it. His sweat and blood are their elixir of life. No, he will never again be an average, ordinary man. He will die before he thinks of himself that way.

### **Explanatory notes and comments**

1. Many of the footnotes in this book come from Wikipedia. I have corrected some and changed others, fixing factual errors.

2. Mrs. Takla's house in Stara Oliwa, in large part, with particular emphasis on the kitchen, is a reflection of my memories of my Grandmother's house in Sosnowiec, Dańdówka.

3. The attack on the Polish Post Office in Danzig on September 1, 1939 indeed took place. When describing these events I tried to present them from the perspective of the attackers. The action in many details followed my description, although the reader should note that Holger and Co. are only characters in a novel and not real people, so what happened to them may not necessarily be reflected in reality.

4. The story of the fleeing Jews, murdered while crossing the river described in the chapter "As long as we're here" really happened, but for the purpose of this book, the place and time of the events have been changed. On September 3, on the road from Sosnowiec to Olkusz, near the bridge over the Przemsza River, German motorcyclists stopped a group of refugees, among them, was my mother, then an eleven-year-old girl (Ida Rogulska - later Małek), together with her mother, sister, and brother, escaping to her family in Olkusz. I have described these events on the basis of her oral account. For, as she told before her death, she was probably the last eyewitness of that forgotten massacre.

5. The situation with the hearse in chapter "The Parade" did not happen. While looking through photos in the National Archive I stumbled upon a photograph from October 1939, showing a horse-drawn hearse on an empty Wolska street and it was this photo that inspired me to make up a story about the hearse as an allegory of what awaits the city after the German entry. Regarding the Parade itself (Germans entering Warsaw in 1939), I am also not sure if it took place, however in the archives I also came across several photographs described as German troops entering the city. A few of these pictures were of Wolska street, so for the purpose of this chapter I wrote a description of this saddening occurrence, although, equally nothing like that had to happen.

6. The story of the incident with Sturmann Udo Ebeling told in the chapter "The curse" has no parallel in reality.

7. The Operation Arsenal (code name „Meksyk II”) described in this book, in „Campo dei Fiori” chapter really happened, becoming in fact first major operation by the Gray Ranks, against the German occupiers. I tried to describe it as accurately as possible. Names and aliases of participants as well as their functions and military ranks, time of deployment of particular sections, wounded and fallen - all that really happened on March 23, 1943, in Warsaw.

8. The events described in the chapter "Retribution" are entirely the fruit of my imagination and nothing similar has ever happened. Although the places are real, such as Wincenty Dydąś' Inn in Cracow. While browsing through the archives I came across a photograph showing Germans and Blue Police searching Jews in Kraków at Rynek Kleparski 5 in 1941. This photograph became an inspiration for the events described in this chapter. It should be noted, however,

that the described action of SS and police did not occur in real life.

9. Part of the combat trail of the 27th Volhynian Division of the Home Army and its disarmament near Parczew, described in "Call of the Wild" are consistent with actual events, although the fictional characters of Captain Grzegorz, Lieutenant Jacek and Antek have been woven into real happenings.

10. Volker's action in the colony near Kampinos never took place, it is only the fruit of my imagination, nevertheless, throughout Poland there were many such settlements, burned and murdered by the Germans to their last inhabitant. Such pacification actions were a common activity of the occupants in Poland. Only on February 2, 1944 the Germans pacified 6 villages in the area of the current Lubelskie Province, Kraśnik and Stalowa Wola districts: Borów, Szczecyn, Wólka Szczeca, Łązek Zaklikowski, Łązek Chwałowski, Karasiówka. Where the total number of victims, according to historians' estimates, was between 800 and 1300 people.

11. In Wainwright's journey through the burning streets of Wola, in the chapter "The dance of the manes" I included elements of memoirs of Waldemar Gorlewski a.k.a. Agora, a participant of the Warsaw Uprising.

12. Describing the evacuation of the hospital from the PKO edifice, I relied on the recollections of Bronisława Magdalena Suszczyńska-Ochman a.k.a. Suzuki, Anna, a participant of the Warsaw Uprising.

13. As for the story of Second Lieutenant Jagodzinski's death, it was inspired by real events that took place in 1947, exactly on May 27. On that day a tailor Feliks Lis traveled by



train from Poznań to Lipno Nowe on the Poznań-Leszno railroad route. He was accompanied by several Soviet soldiers and a woman, Zofia Rojuk. The woman whispered to Feliks Lis asking for help. She told him that she had been deported from Baranowicze and that she and her child had been sold by her husband to the Russians for a bottle of vodka. The Russians left the child at the station and were taking her to their unit. As a result of the actions taken by Lis - he notified the train crew and the traffic officer at the Poznań Dębiec station. The conductors, and later the railroad security guards in Kościana, attempted to negotiate with the Russians to free the woman. However, their efforts were unsuccessful. In response, the railwaymen telephoned the station in Leszno, where the train entered at approximately 0:30 a.m. on May 28. where Corporal Zygmunt Handke, who was on duty that night, made an attempt to aid a trapped woman. However, the Soviets pointed their guns at him and refused to release the woman. Faced with these threats, Handke notified the task unit of the Leszno garrison of the Polish Army. Following that, a shootout ensued at the railway station, in which three Soviet soldiers were killed. As a result, a pseudo trial was held and three Polish soldiers who had taken part in the clash were shot and six others were sentenced to prison.

14. The Battle of Bautzen probably took a very different course, although I have tried to keep the general outline straight, especially the geographic ones, and to keep track of dates. My goal was not to faithfully depict the warfare, as this is the task of historians, not writers. A writer, in this case me, thinks and wants to capture the spirit of the time, the emotions and dilemmas people were dealing with. This is what I wanted to achieve. I would also like to mention that the massacre of the Polish field hospital in Horka and the

burning of the Volkszturm soldiers in Niederkain really happened.

15. Some of the heroes of my book were named after my colleagues and friends as well as friends and acquaintances of my parents. Among others, Doctor Jacewicz, Captain Figurski, Lieutenant Adam, Lieutenant Jacek, Captain Grzegorz, Doctor "Nuta", Franz Schwarz, Platoon Sergeant Buczek.

16. While describing pre-war Gdańsk I relied on old maps, accounts of people living there before the war, press materials, and microfilm photos from the National Library, Warsaw Public Library on Koszykowa Street. I was greatly helped by the participants of the forum Dawny Gdańsk <http://www.forum.dawnygdansk.pl/>, whom I contacted in the autumn of 2005 while collecting materials for this book. I also relied on my own experience gained during numerous visits to Gdańsk, where I was at least 20 times.

17. The same applied to Bydgoszcz, Toruń and Włocławek. Regarding Włocławek, I also received invaluable help from my mentor and friend Mr. Andrzej Mazur, who literally flooded me with tons of materials in late 2017 and early 2018.

18. As far as Warsaw is concerned, my task was very easy as I was born there and lived for 30+ years. For the most part, I drew on my own knowledge of the history and topography of the city.

19. Details of the architecture of the buildings, descriptions of streets and places, all this has its exact, almost photographic representation in reality. I spent dozens of

hours studying the photos and making notes, as well as visiting many of the described locations myself.

20. With regard to the everyday items, such as radios, watches, etc., and consumables, such as chocolates candies etc., this is also reflected in reality and I have spent an appropriate amount of time on this as well so that the reader can feel the spirit of the past in the book.

21. This publication, in a limited sense, is a guide to those times, and the information or descriptions contained herein were selected and chosen with great care and according to the principle of critical source selection.

22. The book went in phases, I didn't always have the time or inclination to write it, sometimes some ideas just had to digest. Over the years access to sources improved and it became easier to write. The idea arose in my head at the end of the '90s, when I took part in a school project called Witnesses of History, during which, as high school students, we had the opportunity to talk to Poles and Germans, participants of the war, soldiers of various formations, often fighting against each other.

23. The first chapters written by hand in a notebook saw the light of day in 2001. Then, over the years, subsequent ones were written. Concepts and compositions changed. Sometimes I resigned from some characters or rewrote them completely until finally, my friend Grzegorz Pasierb suggested taking a look at the ones I know. This is how the character of Mr. Grzegorz came into being.