

# A Rose Blooms in the Desert

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*Alan Messing*

*To Mom and Dad  
Thank you for a great life.*

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# The Blitz



THIS IS DEFINITELY THE BEST part of the job. It was a beautiful summer day and the road was clear, so I opened up the throttle and let the old German NSU motorcycle go as fast as I could. That didn't last long, as I was coming up fast on my unit. I was part of the Twenty-Seventh Infantry Division of the Krakow army assigned to defend southeast Poland. I was just a corporal but was lucky to be assigned to Major Paloski, the division commander.

I was a flag signaler, in charge of communicating his orders to the infantry by waving colored flags. Each series of flags sent signals to the troops in the field. My job was to position the infantry, tanks, and other vehicles and artillery pieces. We spent our days running drills. I followed the commander's orders by raising the correct series of flags, expecting the troops in the field to move accordingly. I heard about other divisions with some form of radio telephones allowing various division segments to speak directly to each other, but these were scarce throughout the Polish army. We were poorly supplied, and the new communication equipment was not likely to reach us anytime soon.

I was not exactly on the front lines. Generally, I was in an elevated position on a hill behind the battle. Frankly, we had never been in a battle in the nearly four years since I began my conscripted service. I was nineteen then, and now I was three months away from being discharged

and ending my service. My plan was to go home and join my family lumber business.

As I sped up the dirt road approaching the encampment, I saw my friend Yitzchak coming up fast. I hit the brakes and skidded to a stop. "Where have you been?" he asked. He was an infantry private on the front line, but we were from the same town of Pysznica. He was a childhood friend, and he was clearly jealous that I had a cushy job with the commander. "How come you get to take a nice Sunday drive through the countryside while we march around in circles, eh?" he asked.

"I ran an errand for the commander." I tried to be vague.

"Was it a secret mission?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not so secret, he needed some supplies," I said, knowing that this would lead to no good.

"What supplies does the commander need that the rest of us don't?" he asked indignantly.

I said, "OK, but keep your mouth shut." I opened one of my saddlebags and showed him the three bottles of good Russian vodka, strictly forbidden by the Polish army code of ethics, which was usually ignored by most officers. "There are three more on the other side."

He just looked at me and started laughing. "You officers really know how to live." He chuckled, knowing full well that as Orthodox Jews we were looked at as second-class citizens by the Christians in power, who would never have a drink with us.

In fact, we suffered much anti-Semitism. As a private in basic training, I took many beatings at night by my comrades as the only Jew in the barracks. They would wait until I was asleep and hit me with the barrels of their rifles. My only protection was my thin blanket. The officers on duty would break up the fight but would never reprimand the soldiers, so it happened quite frequently. Somehow my sergeant allowed me to take an officer's exam, and I was able to earn a promotion to corporal and an assignment with Major Paloski. The beatings stopped, as

the officers had bigger issues on their mind. I suspected Yitzchak still suffered those beatings.

"What do you hear about the Germans?" Yitzchak asked, losing his humorous attitude.

"They are amassing on the border," I replied just as seriously. "Our reconnaissance officers have confirmed this. Major Paloski is out-of-his-mind angry. He keeps sending messages to General Szylling for reinforcements, but the only answer he gets is that they are more concerned about the Russians and are sending the bulk of the troop reinforcements to the eastern border with Russia. Hopefully they are right and we won't have to find out if our training is any good. I have to get back and complete my secret mission. Please take care of yourself."

We shook hands. I cranked up the NSU and headed back to deliver my load.

The next morning, Major Paloski called a meeting at 0800 to review the latest intelligence from the border. The news was not good. The Germans were bringing in more troops, artillery, and tanks. They had closed off several roads and turned them into landing strips for supply and attack planes. There was not much doubt they were planning an invasion. Again, the commander's pleas for additional troops and armaments were ignored. He advised that the week before, the Germans and Russians signed a nonaggression pact, agreeing not to attack each other in case of war. We knew Poland was stuck in the middle between two superior forces. The Polish commanders could only fortify one border well so they chose to protect the eastern front instead of the German border. As it turned out, it didn't matter, but at that time, we felt abandoned.

It was August 31, 1939, three months before the end of my service, and now we were on the brink of war.

At 0400 the next morning, we awoke to the sound of airplanes. At first, I thought we were getting reinforcements, but then the alarms

sounded. We were being attacked. I knew the Nazis were coming, but I didn't know how fast. When I arrived at my position, it was too late. The planes were bombing and shooting at our front positions. In the background came endless tank attacks and artillery shelling, followed by troop carriers. The battle was swift and fierce. I could see our men in the distance falling to their deaths. The position of the troops no longer mattered. They came from the front and the sides. They looped around our position. Our artillery was ineffective, seemingly bouncing off their tanks. There was death everywhere. After a few hours, the fighting edged closer to our position. I could see our men fighting hand to hand, blood and limbs scattered everywhere, with few Nazi casualties. I was in shock. I never imagined we were so unprepared to face the enemy we knew was just over the border. I felt so guilty that my friend Yitzchak was probably dead or injured, and I was back safely overseeing the destruction. I had grabbed my rifle with bayonet attached and headed toward my NSU bike to join the fight when the commander ordered a retreat. The battle was lost, and we had to retreat to the east to defend Krakow.

I signaled the troops that remained that the retreat was on. As we left, more casualties were inflicted on us. The ruthlessness of the Germans was shocking. Killing, it seemed, was as important as taking territory.

We began our march toward Krakow. It was hard to imagine that any defense we put up would be successful. We marched all night and into the next day. On the afternoon of September 3, we halted and could not believe our eyes. We were marching right into another German division. They did an end around and surrounded us.

Now it was every man for himself, and I would join the fight. I expected to die, with only my Karabinek WZ 29 rifle and as many rounds as my saddlebags would hold. It was an eight-millimeter German-designed gun with a bayonet affixed to the front. I'd had this rifle since I entered the army. I kept it clean and serviceable. I was a pretty good

shot, ranking high in all my drills. The problem was, I only shot targets, not actual people. None of that mattered. We were in the fight of our lives, and I had to try to fend off these Nazi bastards who were taking my country.

We retreated over a bridge and took our positions on the eastern side of the river. We had no time to dig a trench. We took shelter behind vehicles, trees, anything to give us cover. What was left of our artillery was positioned and manned. As we looked out over the bridge, we began to see a cloud of fog flowing across the river. Someone started yelling, "They are smoking us out!" The Germans had used the smoke as a diversion to move across the bridge to attack. I do not recall who fired the first shot, but it seemed to happen within seconds of the smoke appearing. Our artillery shells began flying. Bullets were flying everywhere. I could see enemy tanks moving at us through the cloudy air in the distance and heard the sound of the German artillery. Shells began dropping and exploding around me. We continued our retreat toward Krakow. After a while, I took cover inside an abandoned warehouse about one hundred meters off the main road, with several dozen other soldiers I did not know. The building, although abandoned, was filled with boxes and farm machinery ready for sale or delivery and gave us plenty of places to hide. There were windows in the warehouse, but we could not see much of what was happening outside. The noise was deafening, and we could feel the vibrations from the bombing. We had men perched at each window so we could shoot if attacked.

After about two hours of continuous shelling, we looked out from our perch and saw vehicles and artillery blown to bits. The German tanks were closer now, and we could see the Nazi troops advancing. We were scared, knowing that the odds of surviving were small, let alone winning the battle. As they got in range, we used our hidden position to surprise the enemy and began firing. We all began shooting at the same time. I could not tell if I actually hit any of the Nazis, but I could see

some enemy soldiers falling. I began to feel exhilarated that we possibly had a chance to win this battle. As an Orthodox Jew, I often thought about how I would feel about killing another person. I recalled a conversation I had with my cheder morah, a religious school teacher, about the Ten Commandments. Christians believed the sixth commandment was “Thou shalt not kill.” The Jewish translation was “Thou shalt not murder,” a justification for fighting battles throughout Jewish history. Now it was my turn, and killing the enemy was not only allowed; it was my duty to fight for my country and—although I didn’t know it at the time—the survival of the Jewish people.

Once the German infantry troops realized they were under attack, those who were not dead or wounded looked for cover and began shooting at us. The firefight lasted for several hours, and we seemed to be holding our own, even though we had casualties. In order to get a better shooting position, the private next to me jumped out from behind the tractor that was shielding him and pointed his gun through a window that had already been shattered by enemy fire. He got one shot off and fell beside me; two bullets had seared through his head. The blood was everywhere, but I had no time to react. I had to keep shooting and stay under cover.

We were hungry and exhausted, but that seemed not to matter. We were soldiers fighting for our lives. As the sun starting going down, we were losing light and low on ammunition, and the shooting suddenly stopped. Had we killed the enemy? Had we won the battle? A few of us came out of our hiding places to see what was going on. There was a hum of engines that seemed to get louder. As we looked out, there were two tanks perched outside the warehouse. Clearly the Nazi infantry called for help—and it arrived.

I screamed, “Look out and cover up!” I crawled back inside and under the tractor. The tanks began firing on the building. After about fifteen or twenty shells, the top of the brick building began to crumble

and the roof caved in. The rubble fell on and around us. The tractor I was under began to break apart but protected me enough to survive the debacle, although the floor caved in below me and I fell into the hole it created.

After the crumbling stopped and I realized I was alive and not hurt, I crawled out of the hole in the floor that was created by the collapse. As I emerged, I saw that some of my fighting mates were crawling out as well. Some men were crushed and clearly dead. They were scattered throughout the warehouse. Then I looked at the edge of the rubble, and what seemed like a hundred German soldiers were standing there, pointing rifles at us. They were screaming in German, which I didn’t fully understand, but they clearly wanted us to come out of the building. They gathered us up and had us lie on the ground facedown. They gathered our weapons and threw them in a pile.

What would happen to us? Would they take us prisoner or just shoot us and leave us for dead? While we contemplated our fate, we could hear the marching of soldiers and humming of vehicles traveling down the road toward Krakow. My heart sank as I realized I would die here and that nothing could stop this powerful army taking over the country. We were the last line of defense, and we were defeated.

Suddenly I heard what was clearly a German officer barking orders to our infantry guards. This was it. We were dead.

Suddenly the guards began to walk off. They joined the march down the road to Krakow and left us lying there. I got up, as did the others, in bewilderment. They took our weapons but left us whole. Did they show mercy because we gave them a tough fight? Did they think us insignificant insects that were no threat to the mighty Nazi army? Regardless, we were alive and free. The Nazis disappeared in the distance.

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