

On Bloody Paths

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TRANSLATED BY DAN SETZER

Light and Shadow in France

On the sign at the railway station I read the name “La Courtine.” This would be our last camp, where we would make the final preparations and receive all the armaments and matériel we would need to arm ourselves when we moved to the battle line.

The first impression was very pleasant: There were a lot of hills all around us, on which were two-story buildings—old, well-built barracks from an old French artillery camp. The hills formed a round circle that held a beautiful, green valley with a wide stream running through it that emptied into a lake. On the other side of the stream, the waterwheel of an old mill slowly turned. Farther on was a deeply sunken path that led to the massive, gray buildings in the village, which were ringed with old, well-kept wine gardens.

Being born a city boy, I was very pleased when we came into a little village made up mostly of farmers who had a sense for business. Because of the temporary camp, they started trading and peddling, calling out fruit, nuts, and above all wine. Since I had been issued my pack, before I went to walk through the town I organized all of my things in one of the sturdy barracks. Getting a good spot in a barrack is the first concern of any soldier. If one is not gifted enough, he has to sleep outside in one of the little tents, where only two men can lay down, one next to the other. In that case it is also good to be short. If not—then your feet will be lying under the blue cover of the sky.

Delighted with my success, I was able to stay away from my new home until evening. It was rather far to the village, but what does a mile or two mean to a soldier? I was off in my beloved fashion—over the

fields and along the hills, which had been planted by experienced hands and were in full bloom in the early summer.

My first thought: “What an able and industrious people!” Only the steepest parts of the hills that surrounded the village were covered in wild bushes that mostly showed dry, gold-colored leaves. But where there was room for a horse or ox to go, the plow went also. The fields and gardens seeded with crops told a tale of work and of a happy, prosperous home.

When I got to the village it was late afternoon.

A short French peasant was slowly driving his cows, who were ignoring the barking of an impatient dog trying to hurry them up with his baying to get them home faster and get to his own corner in the barn. They had quite calmly gathered together by the edge of the water, under the thin branches of the young birch trees and low bushes thick by the shore of the fast-flowing mountain stream that danced the whole length of the valley until it fell into the lake and disappeared driving the old Frankish water mill.

From the next hill in the distance, beyond a sparse copse of trees, one could see a herd of sheep. There too was a dog among the bushes who kept the frightened sheep together. The sheep maintained their distance and ran from him. The shepherd walked calmly ahead, tapping out the way with his long staff. The wind and the bushes caught his wide black apron, jerking and blowing it in all directions, as if they wanted their darling to stay with them and listen to the bird songs of the last evening hours.

Where is the war? What war?—My heart was welling up with a feeling of joy as I neared the village, which looked so peaceful with its white plaster houses and big windows set in thick walls that were ringed with greenery and partially covered with old moss.

I continued on a narrow path hemmed in by thick rows of hedges until I entered the village. The walls that enclosed the houses had openings. Counters with a variety of goods had been set up. Most of them had signs saying “Café” and “Salon de vin.” It didn’t matter if you entered the “salon” through a small door or if you went through a wide

courtyard strewn with a farmer's old broken farm equipment—it was still called a salon, and be done with it. And since they were all wine salons, you could hear the cheerful voices, cries, and laughter coming from all sides.

After continuing through the noisy part of town, I eventually got to a much quieter street. Only the few soldiers who had stumbled this way observed the sober part of the village with sober eyes.

A few women, dressed in black, stepped out of the darkness. They regarded us with a strange indifference, like people who had already lived through centuries and did not bother themselves with appearances, with curiosity about things. They wanted to see the inner core of the thing. Their eyes seemed to say to us, “We will soon see what you will do, you young, healthy boys.”

Over a narrow sidewalk came a sickly French soldier with missing limbs, struggling to make his way, balancing on his crutches. On his chest were a pair of medals. When he saw us, he smiled with a half brotherly, half joking look as if to say, “Wait, just wait, you red-faced little soldiers!”

On the far corner of the street I saw a church that was barely standing under the weight of years. I went through the low semicircular door and was immediately blinded by the colorful decorations and the various statues. In every corner there was an attempt at beauty, architecture, and art. The statues and the flowers, the chandeliers, the pulpit, and the altar were dimly illuminated by the weak light coming down from the ceiling and a few lit candles. I was pleased with the silence that reigned in Jesus's house.

Finally I had found a little corner untouched by the sights and sounds of the world tragedy. I began to pull together my thoughts and feelings when I heard a quiet, stifled groan coming from one of the dark corners of the church. I got a little closer to that spot and saw two forms with bowed heads. It was two women wearing black mourning dresses. One of them had a child with her. Her head was bent to the ground and her hands covered her face. Tears were flowing between her fingers. Her whole body and bent shoulders were shuddering. Next to

her knelt an older woman. Her thin, meager arms were calmer, but her contorted face, which was suspended over the head of the young child, was distorted with pain and pity.

I felt like I was crowding them in God's house, and I immediately left with a fast and quiet step—back to the barracks.

In my heart I was shaken right to the ground by the scene I had just witnessed. I tried to forget the whole world, and I sat down on the steps leading into the barrack.

Like a giant, deep blue canopy the sky covered the whole area. In the far distance the roundness of the canopy was broken at the horizon by the mountains. The full moon played with the few passing clouds on their way elsewhere. I now began to consider things: Where have I seen a similar sky? A similar picture? That is when I felt someone's arm around my neck. It smelled like wine, and close to my face I saw a pair of drunken eyes and the face of our trombone player.

"Cohen, Cohen!" he said, smiling. "Ya know what I just heard in the village? Someone said that only five were left from a whole band. Only five!"—he stammered as he lifted himself from the step.

Two Storms

One early morning a French soldier went through the village knocking loudly with his baton. The sole inhabitant of the village and the soldiers gathered around him. From a slip of paper, he read the following warning aloud: the inhabitants needed to get out for their safety.

While serving us our dinner meal, Milentor, a waiter, trying to smile, said to us: "Well, friends, eat hearty. This could be your last meal before your funeral." Among ourselves we agreed that the campaign was about to start. During the night our company was moved to a position in the dugouts near the woods. We ate, but the food stuck in our throats and choked us.

"What should I write?" one of my Christian buddies asked me. He was a farm boy named Don. That same question was standing

before me also: "What do you write in this moment?" Later, when we showed each other our letters, we were astonished at the similarities. Written there was "My life, thanks to God, has been healthy and full. We are about to move out; I will write to you from there if circumstances allow."

The farmer hosting my battalion group was running around like he had been poisoned; the children were crying, but he stayed in the village. Two other families had packed up two wagonloads of belongings and took off on the crooked road to the next mountain ridge. We did not particularly like the civilians in the village, but when we saw them drive away and finally disappear from view, it gnawed at our hearts.

The order came to move out.

I will never forget that evening. Two storms crashed into one another: the powerful wind that knocked you off your feet, and the fine rain, which fell like a dust cloud and made the night even darker. And when you opened your eyes after a while with the rain lashing your face, you still couldn't see anything, not in the heavens nor on earth. The only way you could go somewhere and stay on the path and not go astray was with a complete knowledge of the area and by listening to the squishing of the thick mud under your feet. Those who knew the way led the company or rode on a transport wagon, which would get stuck from time to time in the ditch along the road. Then everybody would have to get out, and unseen figures would push and pull on the wagon, fall in the mud, pick themselves up, and beat the horses, who were already breathing hard. It was as though the horses were choking with their hard, difficult breathing, hacking so pitifully that you wanted to cry over the poor, innocent creatures. "Don't beat the horses!" a voice cried out, and men threw themselves at the wagons with all their strength to pull them out. "Oh, go to the devil!" someone answered that merciful fellow; then you heard the crack of a whip and the stamping of horses' hooves and men's feet. From behind someone yelled: "There are more and more wagons coming!"

This went on for hours. Now we all knew that it was closer, that

it would only be a few minutes more. The last figures slipped past us in great haste. Hell or storms, we had to get to our destination on time. A few of our men and wagons were still a kilometer away from their assigned position. But, thank God, all of the wagons were pulled out of the mud and back on their way. Only a few men were hanging with the wagons; most were pushing from below, not counting those who were carrying the packs. No one was talking. Only the mule drivers cursed and beat the horses. But as time got shorter, the less they thought about pity and the rest of the world. We waited tensely.

BOOM!—From somewhere the night was ripped open by a cannon shot, like a signal. In a few seconds everything shook as though it were going to collapse. On all sides we saw what looked like shrouded flames that leaped up through the wet, thick darkness. The nearer cannons deafened us with their frequent roaring, one after another. In the whole width and breadth of the area in front of us it was like hundreds of drums were pounding with a feverish pace, similar to the noise of a hundred post wagons driving hell-bent for leather over cobblestone streets. The drum pounding melded into an unending, wild, deafening buzz that was pierced by the *whizz* of shells that hopefully were flying over our heads.

We all sort of clumped together. No, we were not panicked. We didn't notice it, but we were all soaked to the bone. We just forgot about the discomfort. The muscles of our hands and feet, our whole bodies, were stiff, like something had separated them all. With every shell or shrapnel that flamed up like sparks and disappeared with a crack ever nearer and more often, our muscles seized up even more. It seemed like we were moving too slow, slipping too often, like the hill we were climbing was too high and we were being chased by the exploding stars that were coming closer. Then a shell flew over our heads and blew up to the right of us. It was not a little spark; it was a giant steel cluster bomb. No one was hanging off of the wagons now. Everyone was pushing them with all their might.

"Halt!" Someone came toward us from a side path and gestured with a flashlight. We had arrived. We secured the wagons and the horses

in a somewhat sheltered place and got into our doghouses (dugouts). Someone lit a light. Instinctively we all looked at the walls of our shelter and were satisfied with what we saw. The corrugated steel roof was reinforced with poured concrete. The walls were a pretty marble. A pair of four-footed inhabitants were surprised by our sudden arrival, but who would want to do them harm?

We sat on our packs in the glow of the single light in the dugout, listening to the hell outside grow in intensity and strength and rage above our heads and all around. From time to time flashes of light like lightning lit up the entrance to our dugout. It was difficult to tell if it was the roar of our cannons or the Boche shells and shrapnel.

Little by little the fever that made our limbs shake—in spite of our efforts to suppress it with all our might—began to loosen up. A few of us even ventured out to watch the devil’s dance. Inside, by the shine of the single light, we saw the French translator, and in loud voices we fired questions at him.

“What do you think of the dugout?”

“It is good enough to protect us from the flashlights!” he joked. He told us that once he was laying in such a dugout sheltered like this and could only move his head a little. He told us other such incidents. Under the roar and blasts from outside, we all believed him and were more and more amazed and empowered, as though we too were a little heroic.

When he got a little tired of recounting his experiences, and things got quiet for a while, someone in a back corner yelled to me: “Hey, Cohen! They are fighting for you Jews to get you your Palestine!”

I didn’t have time to answer when the French translator jumped up from his place and ran to me with an outstretched hand, yelling: “A Jew? A Jew?!”

“Yes, a Jew, and originally from Kishnev, even!” I answered.

That a Russian Jew would end up in the French army as a translator for the Americans is not surprising in these times.

Meantime, I was feeling more at home. I settled down next to him, and we spent a long time talking about various things, but above

all about the war. I told him about the Legionnaires, about our people, and about our resettlement in that land. The shells and the shrapnel that fell above our heads did not bother us, nor did the thought that at any minute the sergeant could come in and order me to ride out or go by foot with a message for the command post or the battalion several kilometers away.

In the Village after a Victory

Several days of hard combat followed. We heard only the loud **S**cannon roar of the barrage, but our infantry suffered heavily.

We won! Noroy has been taken! That is what I thought when I saw the exhausted, muddy infantry soldiers coming back from the front lines and marching into the village.

The sergeants called out the names in low voices, and soon they were able to go to their billets. Afterward they went to the kitchens for some warm food. But there was a marked difference in their mood compared to earlier. There was a near holiday mood of the inhabitants and the soldiers who gathered in the village streets in large numbers. The whole village seemed to breathe easier because the Germans who had been hammering them with their light artillery had been driven back so far that they could no longer hit the village, and they were still pulling back farther. We read the latest bulletins that were posted every few hours outside of the canteen. We read that we had taken such-and-such amount of ground, cannons, and prisoners. We read the news and enjoyed with great gusto our chocolate bars, cookies, and good cigarettes, which had just arrived in large quantities. Due to our good moods, we bought as much of these treats as we wanted.

Reading the good news along with chocolates and cigarettes (which, incidentally, we also treated the few French soldiers and children to), people gathered in the streets of the village and recounted to one another their experiences and stories of survival in their first battle. And the doughboys showed off their souvenirs: a canteen, knife, watch, and similar articles they had collected from dead or captured

Germans. Every article was inspected with the greatest attention. However, everyone was even more curious to hear the story that went along with each item as to how it was acquired.

I was standing in one of those groups and saw in the hand of a sturdy doughboy a short German pistol.

The soldier told this story:

“When we arrived in the front-line trenches night had already fallen, but I did not think of sleeping for even a minute. Instead I went into a support dugout. We knew what was about to happen. And when our artillery started to hammer out a huge barrage, a chill went all through my body . . .

“That was nothing compared to the feeling when we got the order to go over the top. Truly, we saw the results of our artillery’s exhaustive work, which went on hour after hour. It lit up the skies over the German trenches with exploding shells and rockets. What’s more, it looked like my hide might stay intact. However, when we fell out into our last formation, my teeth started chattering ‘My Country ’Tis of Thee.’ And when I got to the wall of the trench that I had to climb, and go from shelter to the hell outside, I felt heavy. I thought I would not be able to go over without someone’s help.”

“What were you thinking in that last moment before you climbed out?” I asked him.

“To tell the truth,” he answered, “I did not have any particular thoughts. Yeah, in that last moment images passed before my eyes of my street and my house where I live in the States. The faces of my parents, brothers, and sisters. I even remembered my boss and my co-workers in the shop.

“Every one of us,” he continued, “took out photographs, or a cross, and knelt and prayed to God.” Before anyone asked, he said, “But I didn’t act as foolish as another guy standing near me. He was shaking with his entire body; he had cried and knelt for most of the evening. Oh, yes, I prayed to God, but I prayed that our artillery would keep firing on them. When we finally crawled out of the trenches and saw that the whole field was lit bright and the shells and shrapnel were flying like an

unending hail of fire and steel, I forgot about everything. The only thing that occupied my whole being was a burning desire to go faster, closer to the German lines, and be done with them. When we got the signal that the barrage would soon be moving forward and we could advance a few yards, I felt lighter and ran forward, then fell to the ground awaiting the next signal.

“When we got closer to the first German trenches, we heard among the loud noises around us the rattle of machine guns. Then the barrage reached the first German trenches, and we let out a wild cry. I noted that the Germans were confused and frightened, but I did not give them time to think, and I sank my bayonet into one of them. I could not hear if he cried out or not, but his mouth and his eyes opened so wide that one would have thought they were cut off as I tried to pull my bayonet from his mouth. His hands at first flew up, then quickly dropped. He grabbed my rifle as though he wanted to take it from me. To get my bayonet loose from his body, I fired the rifle. That works best in such cases. I wanted to keep going, but I noticed the pistol next to him. I took it as a memento of the first German I killed.”

“How much do you want for the pistol?” I asked him.

“How much do I want?” he repeated proudly, thinking about it for a while. “You can buy it for a thousand francs.”

“What foolishness!” someone yelled out. “In a while we will have a mountain of such souvenirs.”

I do not doubt it at all. However, I must concede that I am not yet enough of a soldier to imagine the horrid tragedy that lay behind those souvenirs—the horrible bulging eyes. The hands grasping the rifle whose bayonet had pierced his body. As though somehow that last grab was a chance to save himself. I took no pleasure in the souvenirs even though they came from the guilty and condemned Germans. And when I purchased a buckle from a German belt, it was only due to a momentary curiosity about the object. Furthermore, all of this makes me angry and raises a question: Is it impossible to awaken in every man a disgust for such souvenirs, to drill it into their minds and etch it into their souls?

After driving the Germans away, the band assembled in their old

place on the so-called plaza in the village, and we all gathered around them. The scraping and wheezing of the instruments laboring to bring forth little scraps of the best music was, for us, more agreeable than usual. The evening brought out from the orchestra primarily earnest and pathetic pieces.

Every soldier in the regiment knew the faces of the men in the orchestra. Everyone felt gratitude because they helped so many through their playing to forget themselves and distract their thoughts. That is why we immediately noticed that two of them were missing. Two instruments remained quiet . . .

Friends laughed and were happy when Beck was around. But people no longer waited with such curiosity for more of his jokes and funny faces. People listened to the music. They pulled chocolate bars out of their pockets, and the band tried to toss out some cheerful, catchy tunes. But that couldn't distract the thoughts pressing on the minds and imprinting themselves so clearly on the faces: that the horror one had lived through for several days was far, far from ending. The faces of those that not so long ago we had lived with, fought with, and often had great fun with now were missing—they did not give us peace. From more than one comrade I heard the disbelieving remark: I can't believe that John, that Dick, that Jacob is no longer with us; they have been planted in the fields of France! And it always ended with the old "Oh, goddamned Boche! We'll teach you!"