

On Bloody Paths

By S. Cohen

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Author's Dedication:

Dedicated to my dead and
to my living comrades who fought and believed...

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En Route

On our way from Camp Gordon to the ship, they often had us get off the train and march through the streets of a nearby town. In one neat, pretty town we had an unusual heartfelt experience. Young and old, and especially the young women had with every gesture, every cry and every look, expressed their love and hearty good luck wishes. And we did everything we could to appear one of the gang, and march like professional soldiers. On each soldier's face you could read: See how good we muster, how we stay in step, how the earth trembles under our feet. They understood and clapped their hands even harder, cried out and followed us in a thick mass.

Just think of the many young hearts and for how long they will ache until this war is over. It is possible that "theirs" already blooms there. But in the mean time, young people know nothing of happiness, and the pretty girls, modestly, looked at us with clear, meaningful eyes saying "We mean this," and sent us kisses through the air and gave us flowers.

Among the enthusiastic crowd we noted an elderly woman with a twisted face. Her lips moved, as in silent prayer, she clapped her hands, but after a while they were still. She interlocked her fingers and lowered her broken hands. Her face shown with the motherly smile of a mother full of pride for her strong children with their red, round faces. But her eyes glistened with tears of intense pain and fear for their fate.

At another station where we sat for quite a while, but did not get out of the train, we, as always were surrounded by a large number of Red Cross ladies, who gave us cigarettes and snacks. Close to the railway car, a woman with a child in her arms walked by looking intently in each of our faces. She went back and forth several times as though looking for someone in particular hoping "Maybe I will see him." The child smiled at us and babbled with his red lips, but the mother's eyes were holding back tears.

She did not find him – She stood off to the side and for a few minutes turned her head away from us, then looked back to us again. The "perhaps" was gone. That is why she no longer held back the tears.

What could we possibly do to comfort her? How? We all got together to talk about it, and avoided staring at her. Once we noticed that she was a little calmer, we called out to her, and gave her the flowers we had just received and gave her child some of the treats to eat that we had just gotten from the Red Cross ladies.

And once again we heard the old, well-known story: He wrote to her that he was shipping out and it was 'possible' that he might come through here on Tuesday.

When the train began to move and we were forced to part from her, we saw her in the distance, pull herself up to her full height. With her child in her left hand, she thrust her right fist into the air and yelled out to us: "Give one for me to the Kaiser!" – With all our strength we called back to her: "Yes, we will!"

Among the many descriptions of the World War, when they want to show the great suffering and pain of innocent people, one of the most pitiful chapters is the one where partings are described. But the

one thing that brings the full weight of understanding and horror of a tragedy like war is the shock and pain of a mother, wife or lover's cry of pain when the last second of the last hour comes when they must finally let their arms go and release the dearest, the most loved, them, who had been looked upon like the rising sun, who had been looked upon with such hope. And it often happened that due to military reasons, they were robbed of this 'pleasure.'

I have seen many such soldiers. The departure from their own camp is very difficult and very painful. So instead of saying "Stay healthy" to your wife or mother, you say it to the fields and woods, to the lonesome tree on the land that you see in the distance as you travel on the train to the embarkation point. And when you see on the station platforms, total strangers, or farmers with their horse and plow who send us their heartfelt "Stay healthy" and blessing, it is a great help and comfort. But the deeper wound will not heal.

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 materiel 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 old, well-built barracks, gray, two-story buildings, from an old French artillery camp. The hills were in a circle around a beautiful, green valley with a wide stream running through it that emptied into a lake. On the other side of the stream a water-wheel turned that belonged to an old mill. Farther on was a deeply sunken path which 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. Before I went to walk through the town, since I had been issued my pack, I organized all of my things in one of the sturdy barracks. Getting a good spot in a barracks 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, along the hills which had been planted by experienced hands and were in full bloom in the early Summer. My first thought was: “What an able and industrious people the French are!” – Only the steepest parts of the hills which surrounded the village were covered in wild bushes, mostly showing 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 their 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 which was trying to hurry them up with his baying to get them home faster and 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 berioza trees and low bushes that were so 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. They 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, “Cafe” and “Salon de vin.” It didn't matter if you went into 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 more quiet street.

Only a few soldiers had stumbled into this part of the village and saw with sober eyes the sober part of town.

A few women, dressed in black, stepped out of the darkness. They looked at us with a strange indifference, like people who had already survived for 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 struggling to make his way, with missing limbs and 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 though 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 semi-circular 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 alter 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' house. Finally I had found a little corner that was 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 G-d'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 smiled. “Ya know what I heard there in the village? Someone said that from a whole “band” only five were left. Only five!” – he stammered as he lifted himself from the step.

On the Battlefield of Saint-Mihiel

For an entire day we prepared to leave the camp at La Courtine. We were a little chagrined to leave this wonderful place and also upset by the thought that we were about to jump into the fire.

Late into the night we loaded the freight cars with weapons, horses and mules. In the middle of the night the train pulled out.

It was a dark train with lots of cars. No lights except the glow of cigarettes here and there that interrupted the darkness.

On my car there were 55 soldiers who were stuffed in there like herrings. We were tired and wanted to stretch out our legs, but then they would fall on a head or chest and be shoved away along with curses. Most ended up sitting on their packs or propped up against them. The smell of the straw in the train car was suffocating. In the car and on this same straw had also traveled mules, horses and soldiers. Each individual party had left its own bit of filth.

“Oh, its biting!” someone cried out.

“Biting? Scratch yourself!” answered a joking, annoyed voice.

“The General should have to run these risks!”

“The President!”

“The Kaiser!”

“Ah, a stampede is starting!” complained somebody scratching furiously.

That is how we traveled day and night until we reached the Toul Sector. There a portion of us got off to help in the battle which was going on there. My 2nd Battalion was sent farther on, this time marching on foot to the extreme right flank of the Saint Mihiel Sector in the Lorraine between the towns of Metz and Nancy.

The farther we marched the more I felt the nearness of the battlefield. Often units from the American and the French armies passed by. There were less and less civilians. All along the way we encountered groups of civilians with their wives and children crowded onto their 'fourgons' drawn by mules. They were moving deeper into the countryside, running away from a possible attack by the Germans. They did not say a single word to us. Their faces showed exhaustion and were careworn, their eyes looked angry, as though we were partly guilty for their misfortune.

“There is the front!” a rider called out who was traveling side-by-side with me. I looked in the direction he was pointing and saw behind a high hill some little blue stars that disappeared then reappeared anew. It was getting cold. All at once we understood the meaning of the stillness that prevailed over the fields and hills around us. Somewhere above us was the drone of an airplane engine, the pace of our horses became slower. Instinctively we drifted to the side of the road where the shadows of the trees struck by the light of the round, full moon were deeper.

“Halt!” The commander ordered us.

“If an airplane comes toward us, fall to the ground.”

We remained standing there for a half hour. Then the commander came back to our group and said that Sergeant Major Hotchins' group was going to go on with a guide. A French soldier came along and we followed him to the hill, behind which, the signal fires were burning.

With our eyes squinting from the fires, we rode up the hill. The airplane came nearer. We could see him in the clearly lit sky. “That is one of ours,” the guide assured us. In a half hour we came to a small village near the top of the hill. Soon Lt. Middleton [Edward W. Middleton] came to us. He pointed out some stalls and empty houses where we put the horses, and we climbed into the haylofts.

“Is that all there is on a front where men fight?” One of us asked in a joking tone. However, we all knew that it was far, far from everything.

In the morning in an abandoned, half-destroyed village called Landremont, we saw, other than the soldiers from our Division, a few inhabitants, who did not want to lose their houses. In moments of danger they would hide excavated holes (dug-outs). The hills all around were filled with trenches and nets of barbed wire. Soon, over our heads, there hung, like giant monsters, observation balloons. This was a quiet sector that one had to pass through to get to the hard fighting. The little village was far from the front lines where they sent our infantry and batteries with the cannons. Our unit of the headquarters stayed there for a little while. I was able to get back to my work. Because we were far away from the front lines where the Germans could hear us, I was a bugler once again.

But in addition to that assignment, I had another – as messenger. – If our sector became 'busy' it would be a very risky job, but for the moment it was quiet.

It is true that as part of my functions I was given a little horse with a saddle and the rest of the accouterments of a rider, spurs included. I had more pity on him than pleasure and joy in riding him, because it was just my luck to have a nebekh of a horse with all the qualities of Mendele's Mare. When he looked at me with his half-starved eyes; when I saw him with his bones sticking out from under his hide, I felt guilty toward him. I tried to explain to him that it wasn't my fault that he received such a small portion of oats. I tried to make it clear that we all lived off of rations, and I, too, had to be happy with what they gave me. – But the poor horse did not understand such things and continued to beg with his eyes and search me with his muzzle. The best I could do for him was to stable him together with colts who wouldn't nip and bite him so hard. To some extent I had to administer medicine to him. But my poor horse was such a schlemiel that even among the young horses and gentle horses I would find every morning that he had been chewed on and beaten up. I would wash him and salve his wounds, and talk to him from my heart.

Poor horse! What have you done wrong that men should fight for Democracy, or for a Kaiser, a devil? Why should you suffer, hunger and be frightened by the roar of cannons, and the rattle and crash of shrapnel that doesn't make a distinction between man and beast? But doomed, little brother! I am a messenger and they gave you to me with the authority to ride you when I have to go a long distance on a mission. The only help I can offer you is a heavy, Jewish sigh.

Truthfully, I will try to see to it that he is not overworked. When I have to deliver a message to a place that is a half or three-quarters of an hour away, I will leave my horse to rest, and only take him when the destination is farther than five kilometers. Even then I will not overwork him because our sector is quiet and there is no need to rush. He can go just as he would if he were alone. What's more, when

going through a village, I will make him hold his head higher in order to maintain mine and his reputation, because in general slouching doesn't pay.

Though I got little joy from my new position as messenger, or from my poor horse, at least Nature did not disappoint me. She spoke to my heart with love so deep every time I turned to her. I was thankful for the good fortune that brought me together with her so often.

One sunny day I set out just after noon. I had to deliver an order for supplies, and the officer who gave me the order and the directions on where to go and which path to take, also uttered those well-known and much wished-for words, "Take your time." – That meant that I could dally until late in the evening. When I had finished my errand and started back, it was already getting dark. The day was starting to fade into one of those wonderful nights that carries us away from the world and all its virtues and its faults. Slowly my horse walked up the hill and searched both sides of the path for a little grass to pluck. But I pulled him back away until we came to a small woods, because on both sides of the path were grapevines that grew up from the ground and twisted around stakes. The vines were loaded with beautifully-formed bunches of grapes that looked like little pearls peeking out from under the broad leaves glimmering from the beams of the full night-princess.

I have stopped at a flat area beneath the shadows from a group of trees and let go the reins. It did not take my horse long to figure out what I had in mind and he hungrily began grazing the high grass, while I drank in the beauty of the night, and the clear sky sprinkled with stars. It seemed to me that everything around me was contemplating the great mysteries of life, including the tumultuous days with their fighting and death. One would think that the surroundings with their trenches and ditches, chopped up hills were looking out from under the moonbeams with a gentle, quiet question: Why not dream, why not forget yourself in an eternal, peaceful happiness? But I already knew from experience that the gentle question from the hills would be answered by cannons and bomb explosions. Behind the curtain of the shadows that encircled us and changed with the light, men were creeping around and lying in wait for each other, hiding from each other and acting like beasts ready to spring on one another from behind and go at the other's throat with a knife or even with their teeth if the knife is lost somewhere on the path to the other's hideout while he stumbles on twigs and thorns that grow so thick on the sides of the hills. Often the knife falls from between the teeth where it is clenched as a man crawls on all fours, because even the bravest teeth, most frightful teeth, chatter at the thought that they too can soon be knocked out instead of burying themselves in someone's neck. That is what is called intelligence work, patrol work. The job is to take someone alive if you can. If you can't – shoot, stab and run.

Meanwhile everything is peaceful and quiet here. Not a shot, not a sound from the surrounding hills. Nothing more than from time to time the arc of a signal flare that lights the sky then fades.

Leaning over the front of my saddle, I listened to the stillness around me and thought about my recent past. I lost myself in dreams when I was reawakened by some indistinct sounds. From behind the top of the hill where our trenches were, I could hear sounds in the distance rising and falling as though they were being carried on a slight wind. But they were so dear, they spoke to my heart. Is it possible that it could be a coronet? What sort of melody is that? It seemed to me that I had heard it before. No, I had myself, in blessed forgetfulness sang it, hummed the song, but why can't I recall the name of this extraordinary song under these harsh circumstances? The sound causes my heart to beat faster, even without the name. It enchants the whole area around me, as though everything around me stilled, and listening through an enchanted forgetfulness to each note.

Image after image began to come to me in the mysterious light that engulfed the surrounding hills. They began to float before me clearer between the nearby trees – Images from my mother's ramshackle house in a poor shtetl somewhere in Russia, to the noisy America where I sought so long happiness without finding it, until I fell into the ranks of this army fighting for everything that is better and beautiful.

G-d is my witness how much I have believed in the ideals of my army, how much I have idolized that great man in Washington, from whose mouth were spoken the awakened conscience of America, and of the whole world. But not merely out of love of pure truth and to full justice have I latched on to this great union of individuals who love liberty, but also out of love for my own people who have been promised freedom. And also for love of myself, because I want my home, if I will have a home, to be built together with my freed folk in our freed land.

But, does all this have to come to pass through blood and tears? To achieve this does a man have to crawl on all fours with a knife clenched in his teeth? But only tears of deep disappointment, held back for so long, now torn from us are the only answer.

What is happening, am I crying? I, the committed soldier, who is ready to fight and to lay down his life for my people, for the ideals of the awakening, better world? Oh, damn! Oh, shame! I had to laugh at my own weakness.

I gave a sharp tug on the reins, tearing my horse away from his hungry grazing on the high, damp grass, and I regained the path that led back to the village, my billet and his stall. The wonderful sounds that had so moved my heart had long since stopped. I traveled through the single street through the village which was partially obscured by the shadows of the poor, half-destroyed houses. Some without roofs, others without walls toward the street or the sides. Then the usual night-visitor arrived. – Like the buzzing of a giant bee, from overhead came the sounds of an approaching German aircraft. I recognized him immediately from the sound of his tshshu--tshshu, which ended with a strong upward accent. I looked up and saw high in the sky something like a big white summer-insect, that shone like silver under the light of the moon.

Feh! I'm not afraid of you, you damned Boche! – And I stopped on the lighted side of the street. But the night watchman ordered me to get under cover.

No use: When you get an order, you must follow it. Afterwards, when I was tending to my horse – keep this just between us – I stole a little extra oats for him before returning to my billet.

“How many Boches are flying around up there? Asked one of my comrades who was listening to the battle in the air.

“Who cares how many? Soon they won't be able to help the Kaiser any more! All they are managing to do is rob us of a couple of hours of sleep.”

“And occasionally they drop a couple of pills.”

“Do you mean si si[?] pills?”

“Oh, shut up!” Someone yelled out angrily, and soon you could hear the sound of healthy snoring.