

A brilliant American playwright was accorded a rare honor: The Soviets sent her from Moscow to within rifle range of the Russian front lines. Her account of whom she met and what she saw makes absorbing reading

# I MEET THE FRONT-LINE RUSSIANS

BY LILLIAN HELLMAN

**P**ERMISSION to join the Red Army somewhere on the Warsaw-Vistula front had come through the week before, but Ria (who was coming along as translator) and I had been waiting for good flying weather. On the seventh cloudy Moscow day we decided to take a train. Although that meant a long detour (we had to go down into the Ukraine to Kiev and then back north and west again to Lublin, Poland) Ria said we would make it in two days, but the Red Army major who was coming along with us as guide and protector said he thought maybe two and a half days. They were both wrong. For five days the train crawled across the devastated country and, as time stretched out, I grew dirty and tired and sad.

There was little water on the train and less heat, and I had learned that it hurts to wash your hands in snow and does little good to clean your teeth with cold tea. I was tired of canned sardines and elderly sausage, and the ends of bread seemed no older now and no more frozen than I. If I had not felt so sorry for the cheerful white-faced baby in the next compartment, I might have had time to feel even sorrier for myself.

Five days of looking out of a train window into endless devastation makes you sad at first, and then numb. Here there is nothing left, and the eye gets unhappily accustomed to nothing and begins to accept it. Everywhere along the roads the people are dragging themselves back to what had been home and is now seldom more than a piece of a building surrounded by bomb craters. We have just pulled out of Kowel, which is on the Russian side of the Curzon Line. Kowel had been a large, thriving railroad town when captured by the Germans in 1941 and taken back by the Russian armies in 1944.

## Nothing Left to Look At

The train was on a siding for two hours, so we had plenty of time to look at Kowel, or to look at nothing, because there is nothing left: the fine railroad station is now a wall and in the distance there are only little pieces of walls that were houses. I started to go for a walk but I found out that you can't stroll over hills of broken concrete, bricks, wire and mangled iron. I got as far as a clearing where Red Army soldiers were buying food from peasants. I bought some mashed potatoes—glad to have anything hot—a large onion and some apples and was once more impressed with the friendliness of the Russians: People came to translate, to help me pick the best apples, to make proper change, and three soldiers hurrying back to their trains carried my packages for me.

Sunday—yesterday afternoon—the train finally pulled into Lublin. We were met at the station by a Major Zeidner from Army Headquarters. In the disorganized railroad station, with too many excited people meeting too many other excited people, I began to admire Major Zeidner and to understand the Red Army. Within ten minutes we were out of the station—there had been a few minutes delay while we all looked for our Moscow major, who is a rather vague character—and into a shabby but pleasant hotel.

The stove in our room had been heated since the day before, there were large pitchers of hot water and a fine dinner with a bottle of wine. The hotel was heavily guarded by

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soldiers in a courtyard and on the staircase, but I was too sleepy to wonder about that. The next morning it all began to puzzle me, and when I had thought about it a little while, I knew why: We were the only people in the large hotel.

At breakfast I said to Zeidner: "Major, I know the Russians are wonderful hosts but I can't believe you have taken over the hotel complete with guards just for me." He smiled, and I waited and got nothing. I tried again: "Do you think when I'm very old I could truthfully say that I had slept in Marshal Zhukov's bed?"

Zeidner laughed and said, "Perhaps the marshal would be honored in the years to come, but in the meantime where you sleep is a military secret."

This was before the offensive started, and Zhukov's command of the First White Russian Army was as yet unknown. It was an important military secret because where Zhukov is, there is an offensive.

Monday, as daylight came up—at no time during the trip was I allowed to travel at night—we started out. Zeidner, his chauffeur, Ria and I were in the lead car. Behind us was a jeep with a chauffeur, and our Moscow major holding a machine gun. I stared at the machine gun and realized for the first time since the trip started, that we were really going up near the front lines.

It was a very cold morning and I had to keep wiping the window in order to see out. We were driving through country that had been hard fought over. Sometimes we seemed to come close to the Vistula and sometimes we seemed to be turning north. At one o'clock—we had been driving for over five hours—Zeidner said Ria and I looked purple from the cold and he said he would get out and find a peasant's cottage for us to get warm in. He came back in a few minutes and hustled us into a pleasant two-room cottage where he had laid out sandwiches and paid the landlord to make us some tea.

I began to like the major very much when he asked the peasant who owned the house to come and share our wine, and when he gave the peasants' two children precious chocolate but was careful not to offer anybody food, as this would have hurt their feelings. It was the first time, but it was not to be the last, that I saw how courteously Russian soldiers treated Poles.

At about three o'clock we crossed the railroad tracks and drove into a pleasant group of suburban houses.

The major said, "This was a middle-class suburb of Warsaw before—" and the end of his sentence was drowned by the noise of heavy guns from across the river.

I said, "How near are we now?"

The major shook his head. "From now on, there are only three questions you must not ask: exactly where you are, how many men we have, and how much material. Anything else we will tell you." He looked at me: "But you don't ask enough questions."

I said, "The first week I was in the Soviet Union I found out that if I did not ask questions, I always got answers. Anyway, I am no expert on anything and there is no use pretending I am by smart-sounding questions. Tell your people to tell what they want to. I will learn more that way."

We had been climbing the steps into the house, and when the guns started again and the windows shook, I must have jumped, because our chauffeur took my arm and nodded and smiled at me.

### **The Generals Have a Guest**

It was a nice little house, and the lady from Warsaw who had once owned it had

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made it cheerful with a bay window full of plants and ferns. I stood looking at the plants and the heavy furniture, but the major said we would have to hurry because eight generals were waiting dinner for us.

"Including Marshal Zhukov?" I asked.

"No," said the major. "He isn't here."

"But we are in his house again," I said. "He must be a nice man. He has taken good care of the plants."

Dinner tonight with the eight generals was gay and friendly: I think they liked having a guest who was a woman. The Russians know they are men simply without thinking about it and, like all such men, they like women and act well with them: Wouldn't I like more food? Was the room too cold? I must keep as a present General Korolev's cigarette lighter. Wouldn't I like to rest for an hour?

I said I hadn't been so well treated since I was a baby, and General Kusmeon said sadly, "No, the war has toughened us. We don't know how to act with ladies any more."

After dinner, four generals, Ria and I pounded and bounced over the shell-torn roads, going forward in the dark until we got to a building that Korolev said had once been a Polish psychiatric clinic. We went into a room filled with soldiers who smiled at us and saluted. We sat in the first row of chairs, and General Kusmeon turned and said, "*Poryadok!*" in a booming voice, and everybody laughed and sat down.

"*Poryadok!*" means "Order!" and is used in the Red Army for everything. In this case, it meant that the entertainment could start, and it did start over the loud, cheerful explanations of the general who was telling me that these soldiers were celebrating the New Year tonight, because they had been on duty on New Year's Eve. Like all amateur entertainment, some of it was awful; unlike all amateur entertainment, some of it was good. But it was all very touching: a freezing, shabby room filled with men trying hard to have a good time, with the props, costumes and musical instruments they had made themselves.

Everybody wanted to think that this year would be a good year and that the war wasn't so lonely, or that this Polish village wasn't so far away from home. When the show was over and we drove back, I felt sullen and angry about wars, angry that it takes men away from what they want and makes them pretend they have it when so many of them will never live to have any of it again.

Tuesday: All night long, the heavy guns made the house shake, and I sat by the window unable to sleep, watching the signal flares go up. The reconnaissance units were out, and the sound of their machine guns was very close. Before it got light, I could hear voices down the road and, later, I found out they were soldiers bringing in German prisoners.

At five o'clock, when the guns had died down, I fell asleep, but not for long because Zeidner had shepherded us to breakfast by seven. I had three eggs, two cups of tea and four pieces of bread, and it didn't do me any good to say that I didn't want that much. He said it was absolutely necessary that I eat a lot, because we were moving forward and would have a long, cold day.

As we were going out to the cars, I caught a look at myself in a mirror. I stopped to stare and laugh: I had on ski pants, two sweaters and a blouse, long woolen underwear, which bulged in strange places, woolen stockings, socks, shoes, boots, an American Army sheeplined coat with hood, and a large shawl to keep the hood in place.

I said to Major Zeidner, "I want you to know that all American women don't look like this."

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Ria said, "You look like the widow of a soldier who has inherited only his coat and is on her way to a government office to claim her pension!"

After an hour's drive we turned off the road and came suddenly into a wonderfully camouflaged clearing in the forest. Pine trees had been cut to make the clearing, and there were soldiers sitting on the tree stumps, smoking and cleaning their guns. Horses were tied to trees and looked beautiful standing there, pushing their noses into the snow. It was so quiet and calm that for a minute it seemed as if I must be in the pine clearing of my own farm; it was an old-fashioned scene as if from some other war, a long time ago.

#### Illusion Among the Pines

I said to General Chernov, who had come to greet us, "It is beautiful here."

"We don't think so," he said. "We're sick of pine forests. Whatever happens to me after this war, it is not going to be near a pine tree."

Chernov is a stocky, powerful-looking man with a big, gay face. We went down into his dugout where he showed me a locale map so detailed that I couldn't follow it. Chernov was wearing a simple overblouse, but hanging on the wall in front of us was a coat, both sides of which were covered with medals. I pointed to the coat. "It must be heavy with all those medals."

"Too heavy to fight in," he said.

"All from this war?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "I was a lieutenant in the Czarist army, then I joined the revolution and fought through the civil war. All across Siberia for four years."

Ria told him that, coming into the Soviet Union, I had flown across Siberia.

He smiled and said, "We *walked* across Siberia fighting all the way; across the Urals into Siberia, and on until we took Vladivostok."

"And in this war?" I asked.

"In the early retreat, it was I who had to surrender Kowel. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life." He hit his stomach. "It made me sick. But it had to be done. Then we retreated to Stalingrad and fought there." He smiled at me. "We won there and started forward again. I hoped it would happen and it did: They let me retake Kowel." He patted his stomach. "And soon we will fight some more. The offensive will start soon."

"You have fought a lot," I said. "But you don't look tired. I guess winners never look tired."

He laughed and wanted to know if I would like to go with him to watch the daily maneuvers. We walked across the pine forest, and the day was now wonderful, clean and sunny. We went down into another dugout, and Chernov gave me glasses with which to look out of the small window. I didn't understand, and still don't, why, if we were only watching maneuvers, he suddenly pulled me away from the glass slit and said sharply, "Keep the glasses down, please! We are too near to snipers."

Over our heads, machine guns began to go off, and then men came running downhill, followed by guns, tanks, a hospital truck and a field kitchen. They disappeared into another pine forest, and from across the river the German guns started up. We all climbed out of the dugout, and Chernov began to talk to his officers. I thought they were talking about me and the German trenches along the river, but I couldn't understand much, and Ria didn't translate for me.

Later in the afternoon a very large colonel, who boomed when he talked, took us to a

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large one-room dugout filled with soldiers and officers. The colonel said he was the political officer and that his job was to fight when there was fighting and, when there wasn't, to see that the men got what they wanted (letters from home, etc.) and to inform them about the war on all the fronts, and the political issues at home and abroad. He said a soldier who knew what he was fighting for always made a good soldier, and that he was anxious for his men to meet somebody from America.

It was a good meeting, and when we had all got over the first awkwardness, they told me about their regiment and about themselves. They had all been factory workers who had volunteered at the outbreak of war. They were still together, having fought at Moscow, up to the siege of Leningrad, down to the siege of Stalingrad, across the Volga, across the Don, through the western Ukraine, and now into Poland.

When I had got all this straight, the colonel said, "Now tell the lady about yourselves. You're all good soldiers in this room. Tell about how you got those medals." After a long silence, the colonel turned to a handsome young man and said, "Come on, Sasha. You start."

Sasha grinned, looked embarrassed, and the colonel said to me, "He's a hero of the Soviet Union, has the Order of Lenin, medals for Stalingrad and Leningrad, and he is only twenty years old."

Sasha said: "No, sir. I am not. I have got older. I am twenty-four now. I was twenty when you met me."

"All right, all right," the colonel said. "So you're an old man. Too old to talk?"

Sasha, who was a major, stood up and said stiffly, "I went out on patrol. I captured some Germans. I blew up a tank. I got wounded and I came back."

The corporal who was sitting next to Sasha, and who was also covered with medals, laughed and said, "He goes out on many patrols. He has blown up twenty tanks and three bridges. He has been wounded seven times."

Suddenly everybody began to talk; they were remembering things about themselves and about one another, but I couldn't understand anything that was being said, and neither could Ria, who couldn't translate twenty people all talking at once. But I watched these soldiers and listened to their voices and thought again that one of the most remarkable of Russian qualities is their ability to speak about war, death, love and hate without self-consciousness and without fake toughness; they speak simply, like healthy people who have never, fortunately, learned to be ashamed of emotion.

Wednesday: We came back to headquarters late last night and found that our eight generals had waited their dinner for us. It was to be my last dinner with them, so we all made speeches and drank toasts to the Allied armies, to victory, to a good and lasting peace, to Mr. Roosevelt, to Marshal Stalin, to Mr. Churchill, to our great Allied peoples, to art, and so many toasts to my good health that I began to wonder if I looked as sick as I certainly looked dirty.

Poor Ria had a bad time. She doesn't like vodka, so she was busy trying to water it or get rid of it. She whispered to me that she had arranged a hot bath for us, so when dinner was over and we had all shaken hands, two soldiers took us to a wooden shack. There was a bathtub in the middle of the floor, and a great tank of hot water. We decided that I should bathe while Ria washed her hair, and I should wash my hair while she bathed. It was her turn in the tub—both of us were very happy about all the hot

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water and thinking that maybe we would each have two baths—when Major Zeidner pounded on the door of the shack and said he wanted to speak to Ria.

Ria said, "I can't come to the door. I am in the bathtub," and Zeidner said, "Well, get out of the bathtub. It's important." His voice was so urgent and so sharp that I thought maybe the Germans had started the offensive and we were going to be trapped before we could get dressed.

Ria got out of the bathtub and ran to the door, saying to me in a frightened voice, "What do you think has happened?" opened the door a crack and looked around it. Snow poured through the door, and Ria was shivering.

The major said, "Please translate this immediately and hand it back to me!"

Ria put her arm through the door crack, took the piece of paper, looked at it, looked at me, and said in an angry voice to the major, "You know, I think *this* can wait until I get dressed."

The major said in a loud voice, "You are to translate it immediately. General Kusmeon is standing behind me and wants a translation right away!"

### "Given in Friendship"

Ria closed the door and said to me, "And for this I will probably get pneumonia." She read it to me: "Please translate this into English immediately because we are making a cigarette case and want to have it inscribed and finished by morning: 'For Lillian Hellman, given in friendship by the men, officers, and generals of the First White Russian Army on the Warsaw front.'" When Ria had translated the message into English, she opened the door to hand it to the major.

I called out to General Kusmeon, who was standing patiently in the snow waiting for it, "Thank you. Thank you, sir, very much."

"Goodby," he called in. "I won't see you in the morning. I am moving on."

"If you are moving on to Warsaw," I said, "couldn't I come along?" I heard him laugh outside in the dark and move closer to the door.

"If you wait here a week I will come back for you," he offered, "and take you into Warsaw with us."

I had come to the door. I stuck my arm out, and he came up to the door and we shook hands. "I wish I could stay," I said, "but I have to get back to Moscow, and you might take more than a week."

He said, "Tell your army we will meet them in Berlin; give our good wishes to your great country."

I said I would say that to everybody, and good luck. It was undoubtedly a coincidence, but it was exactly one week later that the First White Russian Army crossed the Vistula into Warsaw.

# Collier's

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