Camaraderie on the Front (Retrospective Account, 1967)

Abstract

Guy Sajer (pseudonym for Guy Mouminoux, born 1927) was a French-German soldier who fought in the Wehrmacht's elite Armored Infantry Division "Großdeutschland" [*Panzergrenadier Division Großdeutschland*]. In this account, which was first published in French in 1967, Sajer describes how "German" soldiers of various ethnic backgrounds came to identify with Germany and the German project—with no reflection on German crimes. His memoirs were basic reading in military academies for much of the postwar period.

Source

PROLOGUE

July 18, 1942. I arrive at the Chemnitz barracks, a huge oval building, entirely white. I am much impressed, with a mixture of admiration and fear. At my request, I am assigned to the 26th section of the squadron commanded by Flight Commandant Rudel. Unfortunately, I fail to pass the Luftwaffe tests, but those few moments on board the JU-87S will stay with me as a glorious memory. We live with an intensity I have never before experienced. Each day brings something new. I have a brand-new uniform, which fits me perfectly, and a pair of boots, not new but in first-class condition. I am very proud of my appearance. The food is good. I learn some military songs, which I warble with an atrocious French accent. The other soldiers laugh. They are destined to be my first comrades in this place.

Basic training in the infantry, where they send me next, is less amusing than the life of an aviator. The combat course is the most severe physical challenge I have ever experienced. I am exhausted, and several times fall asleep over my food. But I feel marvelous, filled with a sense of joy which I can't understand after so much fear and apprehension.

On the 15th of September, we leave Chemnitz, and march twenty- five miles to Dresden, where we board a train for the east.

We cross a large piece of Poland, stopping for several hours at Warsaw. Our detachment goes sightseeing in the city, including the famous ghetto—or rather, what's left of it. We return to the station in small groups. We are all smiling. The Poles smile back, especially the girls. Some of the older soldiers, more daring than myself, have arranged to return in most agreeable company. Once again we set off, to arrive finally at Bialystok.

[…]

I walk over to a building which looks like a town hall. A notice board carries a white-on-black inscription: SOLDATENSCHENKE 27^{e} KOMPANIE. Soldiers are continuously going in and out. As there is no sentry, I walk in, and through a room where three soldiers are busy unpacking crates of food. Beyond this room is another, with a counter at the back, beside which a group of soldiers are standing and talking.

"Could I have something hot? I've just driven an officer over here, but I don't belong to the 27th."

“So,” mutters the soldier behind the bar. “Another one of these damned Alsatians pretending to be German.”

It’s plain that I speak hideously badly.

“I’m not Alsatian, but half German, through my mother.”

They don’t press me. The one behind the bar goes off into the kitchen. I stay where I am, planted in the middle of the room, wrapped in my heavy green overcoat. Five minutes later, the soldier is back with a steaming canteen half filled with goat’s milk. He pours a full tumbler of alcohol into this, and hands it to me without a word.

It is burning hot, but I drink it down all the same. Every eye is fixed on me. I have never liked the taste of alcohol, but I am determined to finish this litre at any price, so that I won’t look like a green girl.

I leave this bunch of louts without saluting, and find myself out in the cold once again. This time I feel certain that the Polish winter has arrived. The sky is overcast, and the thermometer has fallen to twenty degrees.

I don’t really know where to go. The square is almost empty. In the surrounding houses, Poles must be warming themselves in front of their fires, I walk over to the parking lot, where some soldiers are busy with the trucks. I venture a few words, but they reply without enthusiasm. I must be too young for them: these characters are already in their thirties. I continue my aimless wandering, and catch sight of three bearded men wearing long overcoats of a strange brown color, who are cutting a tree trunk into lengths with a large all-purpose saw. I don’t recognize their uniforms.

I walk up to them, smile, and ask them if everything’s alright. Their only response is to stop sawing and straighten up, and I guess that they are smiling behind their heavy beards. One of them is a tall, strapping fellow; the other two are short and stocky. I ask two or three questions, but get no reply. These characters must be laughing at me! Then I hear footsteps coming up behind me, and a voice says: “Let them alone. You know that talking to them is forbidden, except to give them orders.”

“Those wildmen didn’t answer me any way. I was just wondering what the hell they’re doing in the Wehrmacht.”

“Teufel!” says the fellow who’s come to dress me down. “I can see now that you’ve never been under fire. Those fellows are Russian prisoners. And if you ever do get to the front and you see one of them before he sees you, fire without hesitation, or you’ll never see another.”

I am astounded, and look again at the Russians, who have resumed their sawing. So those are our enemies, who shoot at German soldiers, soldiers wearing uniforms like mine. Why did they smile at me then?

[…]

Once more we find ourselves standing in the courtyard in that damned rain. We are each given a registered Mauser and twenty-five cartridges. I don’t know if it’s a reaction to receiving these arms, but I notice that everyone is turning pale. Certainly, we can all be excused for this: no one in the company is more than eighteen. I myself won’t be seventeen for another two and a half months. The lieutenant notices our confusion, and to raise our spirits reads us the latest Wehrmacht communique. Von Paulus is on the Volga, von Richthofen is near Moscow, and the Anglo-Americans have suffered great losses in their attempts to bomb the cities and towns of the Reich. Our officer seems reassured by our answering cries of “Sieg Heil.” The entire 19th Company stands at attention in front of the flag.

Laus, our Feldwebel (sergeant), is there, also helmeted and fully equipped. At his side he carries a long automatic in a black leather sheath, which gleams in the rain. We are all silent. The order to move out sounds like the abrupt blast of an express train's whistle: "Achtung! Rechts um. Raus!" ("Attention! Face right. Forward march!")

In threes, we leave the place which was home during our first army experiences. We cross the stone bridge for the last time, and set off down the road which brought us here a month and a half ago. I look back several times at the imposing gray mass of the ancient Polish castle which I shall never see again, and would have succumbed to melancholy if the presence of my comrades had not raised my spirits. We arrive at Bialystok, a sea of green uniforms, and march to the station.

[...]

16. FROM POLAND TO EAST PRUSSIA
The Volkssturm. The Invasion.

[...]

"It's total war," he said, like an automaton. "Nothing and no one will be spared, and German soldiers must be able to endure everything."

Sperlovski walked away. He looked stunned. His eyes were glazed and his steps faltered, as if he were drunk.

German soldiers would have to endure everything, in the world we had created. We were fitted only for that world, and were otherwise inadaptable. Lensen was as still as stone, and listened, stony-faced.

"Is it the same for all our towns?" Lindberg asked. He must have been thinking of his town, by Lake Constance.

"I don't know," the veteran said. "It's possible."

[...]

We found ourselves in one of the rare trains still moving through that region, rolling toward East Prussia through the first frosts of our third winter of war—the fifth or sixth for some of the older men. We moved at night, with all our lights out, as Russian planes, which occupied our bases in Poland, were particularly active by day. We were moving toward Prussia, Lithuania, Lettonia, and the Courland front, to which the remnants of several German divisions were clinging.

Through the darkness and the thick fog we could see large masses of people moving on foot across the northern Polish landscape. At first, we thought we were watching infantry units on the march, but after several good looks we realized we were watching civilians—thousands of them—fleeing through the night and fog to escape the Red hordes who they sensed were very close behind them. We couldn't linger to watch those people, but could easily imagine their situation.

Then we crossed the Prussian frontier, into the home territory of Lensen and Smellens—two pure-bred Prussians, suddenly back on their native soil. Lensen stood up and leaned over the carriage door to get a closer look at his country. The rest of us didn't care so much: the landscape was scarcely distinguishable from that of Poland. Perhaps there were a few more lakes. Otherwise, as in Poland, there was forest.

"You really ought to see it when there's snow on the ground," Lensen said. He was suddenly smiling again. "This

way, you can't really tell what it's like."

As we remained silent and uninterested, he spoke up again. "You're in Germany, for the love of God! Wake up! Think how long you've been dreaming of this."

"East Germany," Wiener said, "practically the front. And then, I don't know if you realize it, but I have a compass, and I can tell you we're moving to the northeast, which is no good at all."

Once again Lensen turned purple with anger.

"You're nothing but a bunch of milksops," he said. "It's your kind of defeatism that's brought us to this. The war is already lost inside your goddamned heads, but you've got to fight anyway, whether you want to or not."

"Shut up!" shouted five or six voices. "If they want us to win the war, let them treat us like normal soldiers."

"You're just a bunch of whining puppies. The whole time I've known' you, you've done nothing but whine. For you, the war has been lost since Voronezh."

"For good reason," Halls said.

"You'll fight, whatever the cost, and I'm the one who's telling you—; because you have no choice. There's no other way out."!

The veteran stood up.

"Yes, Lensen, we'll fight—because we can't stand the idea of defeat any better than you can. And we have no choice. I don't, anyway. I'm part of a machine which operates a certain way, and only that way—and I've been part of it for too long."

We stared at Wiener, somewhat taken aback. We had thought he would be able to adapt himself to any kind of life. And now here he was saying that he could live only for the cause which had already cost him so much.

Lensen went on grumbling, and we went on thinking confusedly about the glimpse of the future the veteran had given us. For me, from the vantage point of Prussia, France seemed remote and unimportant. The cause which Wiener spoke of was also my cause, and despite all the difficulties and disappointments I had endured, I still felt closely linked to it. I knew that the struggle was becoming more and more serious, and that we would soon be obliged to face appalling possibilities. I felt a strong sense of solidarity with my comrades, and I could think of my own death without too much flinching, as a soothing veil that would fall slowly over me and all my terrors of the past, present, and future. My head seemed to be filled with a milky fog, which was without joy but which suddenly made everything easy. Did my comrades feel the same way? I couldn't be sure, but my resignation seemed general.

We rolled on for several hours at a reduced speed. Finally, we stopped and walked through the gray, foggy morning to a camp of wooden huts, whose appearance recalled the robust military organization only recently lost. We were given an hour to rest, and the chance of a cup of hot water with a few grains of soya in it.

"And to think that some fellows volunteered for the food," somebody muttered.

"There couldn't be too many volunteering these days," another voice said. "Very few are around for long enough even to dream of becoming an officer. There's hardly the time to make Obergefreiter (lance coporal), before

they're getting a posthumous stripe."

A few were still around for a little longer than that.

Then a major, who was probably the camp commander, spoke to us.

"Proud soldiers of the Gross Deutschland," he said. "Your arrival in this sector fills us with joy. We know your reputation for courage in combat, which gives us a strong sense of support. Your comrades-in-arms in the infantry regiments fighting in the Polish forests near our frontiers feel as we do. Your arrival here reassures and comforts us, and also helps us in the extremely difficult task which has fallen on us: the defense of German and European liberty against the Bolsheviks, who would take it from us, employing the most extreme and bestial means. Today, more than ever before, our unity in combat must be total and deliberate. With the addition of your strength, we shall build a definitive rampart against the Soviet horde. Think of yourselves as the trailblazers of the European revolution, and feel proud that you have been chosen for this undertaking, however heavy it may be. I wish the greatest possible glory for you, and convey to you the congratulations of the Führer and of the High Command. Transportation and food have been specially placed at your disposal to help you in achieving your aims. Bravo, soldiers, and courage. I know that so long as a single German soldier remains alive no Bolshevik will ever tread on German soil. Heil Hitler!"

We gaped at the elegant officer in stunned silence, trying to penetrate the veil of ignorance which hid our valor from us.

"Heil Hitler!" shouted a sergeant, who realized that the prescribed response to the major's remarks had not occurred.

"Heil Hitler!" we shouted heroically.

"Either I'm crazy," Kellerman muttered, "or he was expecting us to raise his morale."

"Ssht," said Prinz. "We're getting another speech."

This time, it was a Hauptmann (captain).

"It will be my privilege," he said, "to take two-thirds of the men in your regiment under my command, and lead them into battle."

We all had known what was waiting for us, but that phrase made us swallow hard.

"The entire division will be operating in a sector to the north of us. It will be broken up into several fragments so that a series of widely scattered attacks can be made against the Russian thrust, which is extremely strong in this sector. I am expecting from you the utmost in courage and actions of distinction and glory. These are essential because we must stop the Russians here. No negligence or hesitation will be allowed. Three officers can constitute a court-martial at any time, and sanction any penalty...."

(Poor Frösch! How many officers decided to hang you?)

"We shall be victorious here, or be covered with shame. No Bolshevik must ever, I repeat, ever, set foot on German soil. And now, my friends, I have some good news for you. There is mail for some of you, and citations, and promotions. But, before giving free reign to your joy, you must present yourselves at the store for fresh rations and

ammunition. Dis-miss. Heil Hitler!"

We broke ranks without any clear idea of our situation.

"Things are looking up," I said.

"A bastard who'd be glad to see us all killed," muttered Halls.

We were standing in a long line in front of a large wooden building.

"So that's what we get instead of Wesreidau. Something tells me we'll be having a few eye openers, Prinz."

"Impossible. We've already seen everything there is to see."

"He's another one of these madmen," said Halls.

"He's not. He's perfectly right," said another voice behind us.

We turned around in surprise.

"He's right. It has to be here, or not at all. I can't explain why without taking too long . . . but he's right."

More and more disconcerted, we stared at Wiener without saying a word, unable to grasp his attitude, which suddenly seemed so changed.

"I'll tell you why some other time," Wiener said. "For now, you're too thick to get it.

[...]

19. THE WEST
Hela. Denmark. Kiel. The English. Prisoner

[...]

The Americans also humiliated us as much as they could—which seemed perfectly normal. They put us in a camp with only a few large tents, which could shelter barely a tenth of us. Even in prison, the Wehrmacht continued to organize itself. As at Kharkov, or on the Dnieper, at Memel, or at Pillau, or in the black depths of winter on the steppe, space in the tents was reserved for the sick and feeble.

In the center of the camp, the Americans ripped open several large cases filled with canned food. They spread the cans onto the ground with a few kicks, and walked away, leaving the division and distribution up to us. Everyone received a share. The food was so delicious that we forgot about the driving rain, which had turned the ground into a sponge.

The packets of powdered orangeade and lemonade seemed the height of luxury, and collecting rainwater in the folds of our jackets to mix with them a gay, even joyous distraction. From their shelters, the Americans watched us and talked about us. They probably despised us for flinging ourselves so readily into such elementary concerns, and thought us cowards for accepting the circumstances of captivity—the distribution of food in the rain, for instance. Wasn't our condition as prisoners enough in itself to make us walk in silence, with that unbearable air which men have when their pride has been damaged? We were not in the least like the German troops in the documentaries our charming captors had probably been shown before leaving their homeland. We provided them

with no reasons for anger; we were not the arrogant, irascible Boches, but simply underfed men standing in the rain, ready to eat unseasoned canned food; living dead, with anxiety stamped on our faces, leaning against any support, half asleep on our feet; sick and wounded, who didn't ask for treatment, but seemed content simply to sleep for long hours, undisturbed. It was clearly depressing for these crusading missionaries to find so much humility among the vanquished.

[…]

A short while later, the prisoners were moving in long lines past a health inspection. Some were sent to a hospital, others to an endless series of offices from which a recruiting service would send them out to take part in the first efforts at cleaning up a country in ruins. Control and verification commissions then studied each case. These commissions often included representatives of several Allied armies: Canadians, English, French, and Belgian. My scraps of paper fell to a French officer, who looked up at me twice. Then he looked up again, and spoke, at first, in German.

"Is this the date and place of your birth?"

"Ja."

"Well?"

"Yes," I answered, in French this time, "My father is French." My French was now almost as bad as my German had been at Chemnitz.

The other looked at me with mistrust. After a moment he spoke again in French. "Are you French, then?"

I didn't know what to say. For three years the Germans had persuaded me that I was German.

"I think so, Herr Major."

"What do you mean—you think so?"

I felt embarrassed, and made no reply.

"What the hell are you doing with this bunch?"

I still didn't know what to say. "I don't know, Herr Major."

"Don't call me 'Herr Major.' I'm not 'Herr Major.' Call me 'Mon Capitaine and come with me."

He stood up, and I had to follow him. From the ranks of dirty gray-green, I sensed Halls's eyes fixed on me. I waved to him, and called softly. "Bleib hier, Halls. Ich komme wieder" ("Stay here, Halls. I'll be back").

"Who's that you're talking to?" the captain asked me, irritated.

"Das ist mein Kamerad, Herr Kapitän" ("That is my comrade, Captain, Sir").

"Stop talking German, since you remember French. Come along this way."

I followed him through a series of corridors, suddenly afraid that I wouldn't be able to find Halls again. Finally, we arrived at an office where four French soldiers were talking and laughing with a young woman, who spoke to them

in English, I think.

The captain said he had brought along a doubtful case. They put me through an extended interrogation, to which my answers must have sounded far from convincing. My head was spinning, and everything I said seemed to ring false.

One of them—also an officer—called me a bastard and a traitor.

As I remained apathetic and absent, they gave up on me, sending me off to a small room on the floor below. For a day and a night, they left me there, thinking of my companions in wretchedness, and especially of Halls, who must have been wondering about me. I felt a sinister premonition that I wouldn't see him again, and a feverish restlessness kept me from sleeping.

The next morning, a lieutenant, who seemed in a very friendly mood, came to release me. I was taken back to the office of the day before and asked to sit down. This invitation was so unexpected that the words fell on my ears as if for the first time in my life.

Then the young lieutenant looked through my papers and spoke to me.

"Your story took us somewhat by surprise yesterday. Now we know that the Germans often forced young men with German fathers into their army. If that had been your case, we would have been obliged to keep you a prisoner for a while. However, with you it was the mother, and we cannot detain you. For your sake, I am glad," he added gently.

"We have now liberated you, and this has been recorded on the papers I am handing back to you. You may return to your home, and resume your old life."

"To my home!" He might just as well have been talking about the planet Mars.

[...]

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