

## **THE INVISIBLE FRONT- LINE OFFICERS**

### **Statement in Light of the Experiences of Fighting Nazi Germany in the Polish Forces under Soviet Command in World War II.**

Many years before the world learned that Palestinians dislike Israelis and vice versa, the Russians had disliked the Poles and the Poles had disliked the Russians. In fact, “disliked” would easily qualify for the title of UNDERSTATEMENT OF THE CENTURY.

The profound antagonism has a deep historical, cultural, and religious background. Poland ceased to exist as an independent state in 1795 as a result of three imperialist partitions led by Tsarist Russia. Poland has been a devout Catholic Country leaning toward Western Europe in its political and cultural outlook and traditions. On the other hand, Eastern Orthodox Russia, ruled by absolute Tsars, distrusted the West by placing its security in isolation from the West.

Poland regained its independence in 1918, only to have to defend itself against the Red Army in 1919 and 1920. On September 17, 1939, Poland, then engaged in a desperate struggle for survival against invading German armies, was attacked from the East by the Soviet armed forces in what became, in effect, the fourth partition of Poland.

Little wonder that in 1945 there wasn't much love between the Poles and the Russians; but this is not the heart of the story.

After Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Stalin made amends with his former enemy, the Polish Government in Exile in London. Desperate in its titanic struggle against the Wehrmacht (German Army), the Russians organized a Polish Army among deportees to Gulags, (slave labor camps,) to help it fight for the survival of the U.S.S.R.

It was a strange Polish Army. I was part of it. There were enough soldiers, but a shortage of officers; the result of massacres of Polish officers by the N.K.V.D. (predecessor of K.G.B.) in Katyn Forest in the spring of 1940. Consequently, a number of ethnic Russian officers were clad in Polish uniforms and transferred into the Polish Army to command the troops. At the same time the Russians undertook an accelerated program to train a new generation of officers from among former Polish and inmates of Gulags. The result was the emergence of two groups of officer cadre in the Polish Armed Forces; Polish officers who were ethnic Poles and Polish officers who were ethnic Russians. Since both the U.S.S.R. and the Polish inmates of Gulags had substantial Jewish minorities, among the Russian and Polish officers there were a number of Jews. and so, there were ethnic Russian officers, Jewish-Russian officers, ethnic Polish officers, and Jewish-Polish officers.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of light field artillery of the Polish Armed Forces, which I was part of, had approximately 30 ethnic Russian “Polish” officers and fifteen ethnic Polish officers. It also had two Polish-Jewish officers: Lieutenant David Weissberg, and Lieutenant Henryk Gurman. With retreat of the German Forces in the spring of 1945, it became clear that the end of the war was imminent, and the thoughts of the “Gentlemen of the Regiment” turned toward the resumption of their civilian lives.

Old hatreds and antagonisms die hard. The Russian-Polish officers did not mix socially with their Polish-Polish counterparts, except at certain official regimental. On one occasion, however, after a few drinks, the two groups mellowed, and then engaged in a little heart-to-heart chat. The chitchat turned to the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, as well as to the future civilian life. The participants of both groups pointed out that not everyone could be discharged, because there still was a need to defend "our Socialist Motherland" against the danger of imperialist-capitalists aggressors lurking in every corner of the globe.

Somehow the connection was made between the liberation of the remnant survivors of the Holocaust in Nazi extermination camps, the impending return to civilian life, and the need to retain a military infrastructure for the defense of our "Socialist Motherlands." And so the two groups, hostile to one another most of the time, found common ground in their unanimous conclusion about "Jew boy" officers, as they were called. Regardless of who of us gets to return home to our families, "them guys" owe it to serve for many, many years to come. An observation/accusation was made that "them guys" routinely dodge their duty to defend their country whenever possible, and, if they serve at all, it is either in "safe" cushy jobs such as supply depots, or as politruks, (Political commissars,) but never as front-line officers.

The honeymoon of "gemuetlichkeit" between the two groups did not last long as the effect of vodka dissipated; but for a brief moment they did find common ground and reached a consensus on one issue. Somehow the presence and existence of the two front-line officers in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment who proved their competence in several battles during their two years of front-line military service, that of Lieutenant David Weissberg and of Lieutenant Henryk Gurman was overlooked during the brief moments of brotherhood and congeniality, since those two officers were "invisible." Overlooked, likewise, was the fact that both, Lieutenant Weissberg and Lieutenant Henryk Gurman had been decorated for bravery in the Battle of Lenino in October of 1943.

The episode described in the preceding paragraphs constituted the only voluntary social interaction between the two groups, and was followed by a prompt resumption of mutual antipathy and hostility.

Lieutenant David Weissberg perished in the final assault on Berlin in April of 1945. Lieutenant Henryk Gurman survived World War II; he currently resides in the State of Minnesota.

#### NOTE

I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Ralph Ellison for borrowing his CONCEPT OF INVISIBILITY.

Henryk Gurman, September 2005, Woodbury, Minnesota