

Boris Lerman, His Wife And His Friends



This photo was taken in St. Petersburg Jewish school. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Victory over fascist Germany we came there to tell schoolchildren about the war. We were four: my wife, my friends (former soldiers) and me.

I went to the army as a volunteer in summer of 1943. At that time I worked as a turner and had exemption from military service. But I wanted to volunteer. The factory produced airplanes; therefore every worker was on a war footing. The master simply ordered me to go to my lathe. Later I went to the military registration and enlistment office, and they advised me to tell nobody and go directly to the place of joining.

- And what will happen at my factory?
- Later we will inform them that you left for the front line.

So I appeared in Ryazan (a city 200 km far from Moscow) in the training tank battalion. Later we received new American self-propelled gun and were sent to the 1st Tank Army, to the Tank Corps #11. Till 1944 I participated in defense of Moscow.

Later I fought against Germans in Belarus and in Ukraine. When in Poland our self-propelled gun was knocked out, the driver was taken to hospital, and I became a motorcycle submachine gunner at the reconnaissance battalion. Together with soldiers of the 1st Tank Army I liberated Poland.

On March 29, 1945 when we liberated Gdynia (a city in Poland), we got to know that Germans retreated and left a lot of technical equipment. So we went to the sea shore to have a look at it.

Short of that place, we saw a forest. We also saw barbed wire and people pottering about. We stopped. As far as I could understand German, I was sent there to understand the situation. I came nearer and saw the barbed wire and a locked gate. I asked: 'What is going on here?' And got the answer: 'This is a camp.'

I came in and saw people lying, kneeling. Some of them were dead. Those who were able to speak said that they were Jews and were afraid to leave. I explained them that the war was finished and they were free.

And we went on to find German technical equipment. We found it to be damaged, there was nothing to be repaired. I picked up only 2 wrenches.

On our way back we saw people who left the camp: they were more dead than alive. They were trudging along the road carrying bread (slices and loaves): probably local residents gave it to them. Now it seems to me that that concentration camp was situated 40 kilometers far from Gdynia on the shore of the Baltic Sea.

We were the first to penetrate into Berlin (it happened on April 21, 1945). We participated in street fightings, attacked Reichstag. Usually infantry goes behind tanks, but in Berlin it was vice versa: we moved in front of tanks.

When we approached Reichstag, we received an order to organize special assault groups consisting of 4-10 tanks and 40-60 submachine gunners (the number depended on the number of soldiers we could gather around). The soldiers went in front of tanks, armed with panzerfausts (weapon of the latest design - a prototype of modern grenade cup discharge). Soldiers made their way through the streets of the city. They were able to destroy tank from the distance of 100-200 meters. If we were armed that way in the beginning of the war, German tanks would have never cut their way through.

The assault groups approached the city center from different directions. Our group moved ahead to Imperial office, under which Hitler was in hiding in deep underground shelter. On April 29 we were already very near to that Imperial office, but suddenly we received an order to change direction of our attacks since from the opposite side there approached the shock army #5 (it could result in incidental casualties).

Later we got to know that Hitler committed a suicide.

On April 30 Soviet army commanders delivered an ultimatum to Germans, but they refused. Therefore we started taking the city by storm: artillery, Katyushas, airplanes bombed the city. Germans' resistance was broken down, and they put in front of every house piles of guns.

We celebrated a long-awaited VICTORY with pride and elation.

That was the end of the war. Our tank battalion was lodged in German military barracks in Dresden. In Germany I served 4 years more.

I got home only in 1949. On my worldly-wise soldier's blouse people could see the following decorations: Order of the Great Patriotic War (2nd Class), Order of the Red Star, Medal for taking Berlin, Medal for liberation of Warsaw, Medal for Victory over Germany.

I served honestly and was considered to be a very efficient soldier. I remember that after demobilization headquarters of our battalion received 2 letters of acknowledgement. Our commanders decided to write the first one in my name (Lerman Boris), and to adjourn consideration of the second letter.