



Willie Glaser: Memoirs of a young German born Jew in the Polish army 1941 - 1947



Three generations of soldiers: Willie's maternal grandfather Bernard Krieser in the Austrian army (picture taken approx. 1880 in Olomouc, Moravia), his father Ferdinand as an Austrian soldier during WW1, Willie Glaser as a Polish soldier after WW2

(Collage: *rijo*)

Family background

To understand my background I have to relate to my grandfather's emigration from Poland to Germany, which had a direct bearing why I had Polish nationality, even though born and living in Germany.

In 1887 Leiser and his wife Esther moved from then Austro-Hungarian Galicia to Leipzig, Germany. In 1890 my father Ferdinand was born in Leipzig.

The year 1892 saw the Glaser family moving to Fürth in Bavaria. Leiser Glaser practiced his trade as a master shoemaker.

During WW1 my father served in the Austrian army from 1914 to 1918. After the war Galicia became part of the successor state Poland, consequently the Glaser family had to assume Polish nationality.

My father tried to obtain German citizenship but he did not succeed and the Glaser family had to carry Polish passports. I received my passport at the age of 13.



Three symbols, one biography: The Star of David, the crest of the First Polish Armored Division and the cloverleaf of the town of Fürth
(Design: *rijo*)

The separation of the family

In 1938 my sister was sent on a “Kindertransport” (children’s transport) to England. After a short while she was taken in by a Jewish family from Belfast, Northern Ireland. This family also arranged for a visa for me. I arrived in Belfast in 1939, one week before the outbreak of WW2.

Early in 1939 my father was able to go to France. He had the plan to make arrangements for my mother, two sisters and my younger brother to join him in Paris. The start of WW2 found my father in Paris, my mother and the children in Fürth, my sister and me in Belfast.

From 1939 to 1941 I worked in Belfast. Amazingly, during these years my sister and I were able to correspond with our mother in Fürth by regular mail. Every 2 to 3 weeks we received a letter from mother. It was a simple scheme: The couple who cared for my sister had children living in Dublin. The Irish Freestate of Eire was neutral. There was regular mail service between Germany and Eire.

Letters from our mother and our answers were carried back and forth between Belfast and Dublin. Naturally, the letters from mother were addressed to the children in Dublin. Mother wrote carefully about some hardships and the cold winter. By the end of 1941 mother’s correspondence ceased.

Volunteering for the army

At the beginning of 1941, at age 20, I looked around me: All the Jewish boys of military age had volunteered for the army (unlike England, there was no conscription in Northern Ireland). I decided also to join the army and presented myself at the recruiting office. The sergeant on duty looked at my papers and told me because I am Polish, I had to see the officer on duty. The duty officer was not sure either. He made a couple of calls for assistance. Finally he instructed me to go to London and report to the Polish consul. He gave me a military travel document to London and a food voucher.

In London the Polish consul received me with open arms. I had to wait a day for my papers and got a bunk in the Polish “White Eagle Soldiers’ Club”. The next day, I received my travel documents, the destination being a Polish army reception camp somewhere in Scotland. Upon my arrival there I was assigned a cot in a Nissen hut and told that I will be interviewed by an officer.



1945, Aurich (Germany). Lance corporal Glaser with his decorations: The Cross of Valor and three ribbons for the theaters of war he served in. The medal on the breast pocket is the regimental badge.

(Photo: private)

Becoming a Polish soldier

So, here I was lying on my cot and contemplating my future as a Polish soldier. I did not have a clue what was going on around me because everybody spoke Polish. Actually I did well as

some spoke English and some spoke German. At the moment this was enough to take care of basic necessities.

I was wondering how ever I was going to learn Polish. As a matter of fact after two years I was fluent in speaking Polish, less fluent in reading and my writing still was poor.

I had an interview with a captain who was very interested in my case. I was assigned to the camp's office. In the morning I had to make "dogs' tags", a set of one round and one oblong tag made from plastic. I was given a tool box with a set of steel punches, with alphabetical letters at one end. I had to punch the name, birth data and religion on the tags.

The camp was populated by a permanent staff and incoming transients, escapees from Poland and France, volunteers from South America and other countries, outgoing because of age or illness.



1942, Dundee (Scotland). Assembly before prayer service, front row, second from left captain H. Klepfisz, third from left senior chaplain H. Melcer
(Photo: private)

Because I did not speak Polish, I was exempted from guard duty. The cook soon figured that I am not pulling my weight, so he whispered in the camp commandant's ear that he needs help in the morning. I was assigned as the cook's helper hence he was able to sleep a little longer.

At 5.00 AM a guard woke me up. I had to take out the ashes from two large stoves and prepare porridge and coffee. I was told that I made the best tasting porridge and brewed the best coffee.

After about two months I was transferred to a regular unit. Somebody figured my Polish being sufficient to learn how to shoot a rifle.

In late 1941, I was assigned to the 6th Company (Heavy Machineguns), 2nd Battalion, 3rd Independent Infantry Brigade. The camp was located in Tentsmuir, somewhere in the Scottish moors near the coast. We had to guard this area.

A Jewish soldier in the Polish army

I fell easily into the routine of guard duties, military exercises and weapon courses. Shortly after my arrival, the regimental chaplain paid me a visit. We had a lot to talk about. He showed a great interest in my family.

The chaplain told me that he will contact the Jewish chaplain to visit me. He also excused me from Sunday morning church attendance.



1942, Dundee (Scotland). Rosh Hashanah service, Jewish officers in front row including a Jewish Scotsman, behind him (with glasses) Willie Glaser
(Photo: private)

Eventually I met other Jewish soldiers and officers and the Jewish army chaplain paid me a visit. We had a long talk about the situation of the Jews in Poland and the other German occupied countries. This news filtered down very fast. There was a sophisticated courier service in place between the Polish resistance (“Polish Home Army”) and the exile government in London. While I was worrying about my family, I still had to carry on soldiering.

On Christmas 1941, the commanding officer of the battalion had the bright idea to hand over all duty functions to Jewish soldiers and officers. Because I spoke a good English, I was assigned to guard duty at the main gate. Local people came visiting, bearing gifts.



1942, Dundee (Scotland). Head table at Rosh Hashanah celebration with senior chaplain H. Melcer making the benediction over the wine
(Photo: private)

The years 1941 and 1942 were uneventful, the usual guard duties and military exercises kept me busy. Nobody liked weekend duties. I let it be known that I did not mind weekend duties, as long as I got a weekend pass the following week. This scheme worked well for me.

I loved to go to Edinburgh and attend Shabbat services in the local synagogue. I became friendly with a member of the congregation and was usually invited for Friday night supper and Shabbat dinner.

I was able to spend furloughs with my sister in Belfast. Over the years from 1942 to 1944, I was able to receive many three day passes, which I spent in London.

I usually managed to get a bunk in the “Balfour Club”, a facility for Jewish servicemen. While visiting the “White Eagle Club” for Polish personnel, I made my first contacts with two Jewish soldiers who like me were born and lived in Germany. We had a lot in common, both arrived in England on children’s transports from Germany.



Membership card of the “White Eagle Club”

(Photo: private)

One became my best friend, his name was Gustav Goldstaub from Frankfurt. We met very often in Edinburgh.

One of the highlights during my stay in Scotland was the attendance in several Passover and Jewish New Year services in Dundee and Edinburgh, which took place under the auspices of the Jewish communities and under the command of the senior army chaplain, Rabbi Major H. Melcer and Rabbi Dr. H. Klepfisz.



1943, Dundee (Scotland). Passover service, third row, second from right Willie Glaser
(Photo: private)



1943, Dundee (Scotland). Passover Seder with senior chaplain Melcer in his regalia (center); Willie Glaser to the right in the foreground (with glasses)
(Photo: private)

I was able to meet another two German born Polish Jewish soldiers. We discussed this with the chaplains. The conclusion was: We were eight of this strange breed in the Polish army. There were some 300 Polish Jewish servicemen attending the holiday services. Many Jewish soldiers from the Polish army stayed with friends in London, Manchester and Leeds during the holidays. It is estimated, that 800 to 1,000 Jews served in the Polish army in England.

Sojourn in Scotland

I would be amiss not to talk about Scotland and its people, both gentiles and Jews, after all I was living in Scotland for over three years. I already mentioned the Jewish communities in Edinburgh and Dundee. The long time I spent amongst my Scottish hosts left me with an everlasting impression of their generosity and kindness. The warmth of the Scottish fathers and

mothers which I befriended helped to alleviate my concerns about my family. A strong attachment between Scottish people and Polish soldiers developed.

I was stationed in many places in Scotland, such as Tentsmuir, Cupar, Haddington Dalkeith. One place which I will always remember was Dura Den, not far from Bridge of Allan. Dura Den is a romantic two mile long wooded gorge. The little river Ceres Burn follows the road. My platoon was billeted in the what I believe was the Masonic Hall of Dura Den, which was located on this road, very close to an enchanting water fall, a peaceful scenery indeed.

I became very friendly with a couple whose son was killed in action in Africa. They also had a large library and I am an avid reader. Very often I was invited for a cup o' tea. They told me I reminded them of their son.

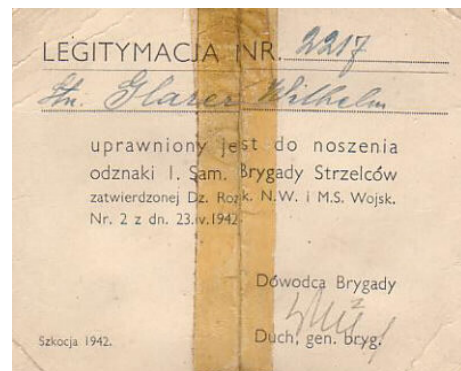
The visible bond between the Scottish people and Polish army can be seen in the accoutrements to the uniforms in form of badges. The close relations between the Polish military and Scotland is evident from the emblem of the Polish HQ, which features a Polish eagle and a Scottish lion.



Emblem of the Polish HQ

(Photo: private)

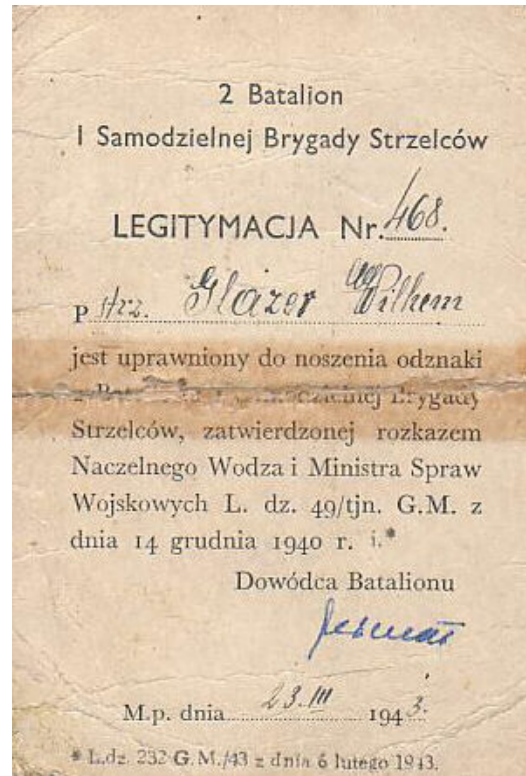
The badge of the 1st Independent Rifle Brigade shows the Polish eagle with a wreath of thistle leaves and is centered with a thistle. The thistle is a very old Scottish symbol.



The cover and inside of Willie Glaser's legitimization to wear the brigade's badge

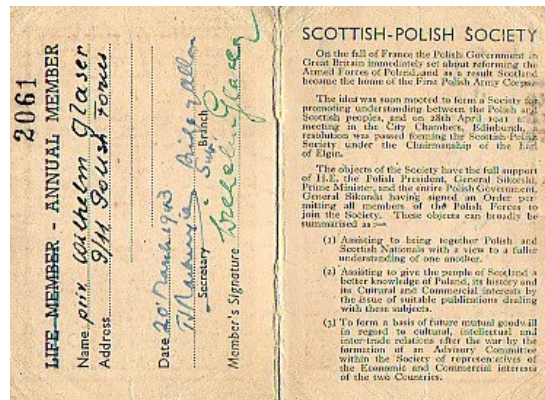
(Photos: private)

Also shown is the badge of the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Independent Rifle Brigade, which is a very interesting badge. Underneath the number “2” is a fabric ribbon showing the Stewart tartan.



The cover and inside of Willie Glaser’s legitimization to wear the battalion badge (2nd Battalion, 1st Independent Rifle Brigade)
(Photos: private)

This Stewart tartan got me in a little bit of trouble. A rumor circulated, that soldiers entitled to wear the 2nd Battalion badge were made honorary members of the Stewart clan and are entitled to wear the Royal Stewart kilt. My friends belonged to the Stewart clan, so one fine day while visiting with them, the subject of the Stewart tartan came up. They showed me their late son’s kilt and accessories. That is when the thought struck me to wear a kilt to a dance arranged by the Scottish-Polish Society in Bridge of Allan, not far from Dura Den.



Willie Glaser’s original membership card of the Scottish-Polish Society
(Photos: private)

I must tell about a chance meeting with Prime Minister Winston Churchill. After arriving with a friend at the Cupar Fife railway station for a trip to Edinburgh we were standing on the platform, when Winston Churchill strolled on the platform accompanied by two security men. Taken by surprise, we managed to salute him, he acknowledged our salute with a smile. He sat down on a waiting bench, unfolded his newspaper and started to read. Our train arrived and we left. We guessed that Churchill was going to or coming from an inspection of a military facility in the area. He probably was waiting for a special train to take him back to London. My friend had a camera with him and was able to take one picture.



PM Sir Winston Churchill in Scotland, 1942
(Photo: Pinchas Bokser)

My friends name was Pinchas Bokser. The date of the picture is about late fall, probably October 1942. Pinchas was wounded in action and evacuated to a hospital in Glasgow where he died of his injury. He is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Glasgow.

With the 1st Polish Armored Division

In 1943 I was transferred to the First Polish Armored Division. I had to report to the regimental office of the 10th Mounted Rifles. Originally this unit was a cavalry regiment.

The regimental sergeant major interviewed me and told me to report to the officer commanding the 1st squadron. After a lengthy and probing interview he told me that I was assigned to number two troop with the call sign "Barbara 2". My duty would be radio operator / gunloader. "But Sir," I replied to the officer, "I consider my spoken Polish being passable for

regular soldier duty (I was thinking as an infantry soldier). I am not sure it is good enough to function as a tank radio operator.” His reply was: “Willush, if I am not worried, why should you? Now report to the tank commander and good luck.” The name “Willush” stuck to me and became my call name on the regimental radio net.

At this time I began to understand all the searching questions I was asked. I did not realize how interdependent a tank crew is. With five crew members, in a case of emergency each one had to be able to do the jobs of others in addition to his main function. We had to live and function in harmony.

More intensive tank training took place with radio, gunnery and driving courses. I was very active in sports, being good at volleyball and a mean soccer player.

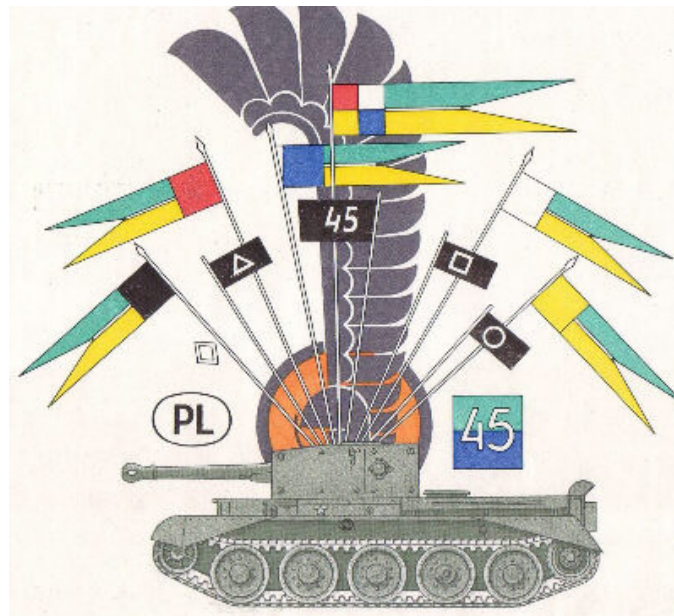
Spring and summer 1944 brought very bad news about the situation of the Jews in Poland and the other occupied countries.

Here I was, sitting on a big tank with a big gun and yet, I felt so very helpless.

The 10th (Polish) Mounted Rifles (10 Pulk Strzelcow Konnych / 10 PSK)

When I joined the 10 PSK I was not aware of the regiment’s long tradition dating back to the regiments of Mounted Rifles during the Napoleonic wars.

The regiment’s modern history started after the independence of Poland in 1918, when the first squadron was formed.



The regimental insignia of 10 PSK: The tank is the “Cromwell”, the regimental colors are green / yellow separated by a thin white insert. The first pennant with the black square (white rue) is Headquarter Squadron, the red square (white triangle) 1st Squad. White insert (white square) 2nd Squad. Yellow insert (white circle) is 3rd Squad. Headquarter Squad shows all combined colors. PL stands for Poland, the number 45 was assigned to all British and Canadian reconnaissance units.

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)



Cruiser Tank Mark VII Cromwell painted in 1st Polish Armored Division markings for display purposes at The Tank Museum, Bovington, Dorset (UK)

(Photos by courtesy of The Tank Museum taken from the website D-Day Tanks)

When the Red Army crossed into Poland in 1939, orders were given to cross the border with Hungary. The whole regiment crossed over to Hungary and was interned. Later, almost all of the regiment managed to reach France. In France the 10 PSK was part of a Polish brigade.

When France fell, the regiment together with the British army was evacuated from Dunkirk to England. In 1943 I joined the regiment in Scotland.

For me, the most memorable places the regiment stayed were the shooting ranges in Kircubright in Scotland and Dalkeith Castle near Edinburgh. I will always remember the cold and drafty rooms of the castle. Otherwise I was quiet comfortable with the still somewhat strange environment for me as a German born Jew. The tank crew of “Barbara 2” lived harmoniously and pulled together.



First Squadron in England, one week before Normandy landing, in the center “Barbara 2” (see x); the triangle on the tank and the pennant in the foreground is 1st Squad’s emblem

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

Including myself, there were five Jews in the 10 PSK. The Jewish army chaplain referred jokingly to us as his “five men minyan”.(for a full prayer service a quorum of ten men is needed, a minyan).

One of the Jewish boys was my good friend Szlama Podchlebnik. He escaped from Poland via Shanghai and found his way by boat to Canada. In a Polish reception camp in Owen Sound, Ontario, he became a Polish soldier and met a local Jewish girl. After the war he joined me in Canada. He married his girlfriend, settled down and became a very respected businessman. He was the president of the Chamber of Commerce in Owen Sound, Ontario. Szlama died a few years ago.

I would be amiss not to pay tribute to the memory of some fifty Jewish Chawerim (Comrades) of the First Polish Armored Division, killed in action on the battlefields of France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, including my good friend and Chawer (comrade) Gustav Goldstaub. Like me, he was born in Germany, on May 10, 1923 in Frankfurt/Main. He joined the 24th Lancer tank regiment in England. Gustav was killed in action on September 4, 1944 near Humières (France, Département Pas de Calais). He was the gunner on a Sherman tank of the third squadron. His tank received a deadly hit, also killing the driver and wounding the other three crew members. Gustav Goldstaub is buried in the Neuville-Saint-Vaast Military Cemetery.



The grave of Gustav Goldstaub in the Neuville-Saint-Vaast Military Cemetery
(Photos by courtesy of Monsieur Laurent Taveau, France)



Memorial for Gustav Goldstaub and another member of his crew. It was erected by the citizens of the town of Ruiseville on September 10, 2006, where he fell. Probably this is the only memorial honoring individual Polish soldiers in any theater of war where the 1st Polish Armored Division was fighting.

(Photo by courtesy of Monsieur Laurent Taveau, France)

They sacrificed their lives for Poland and Am Israel (The people of Israel).

Landing in Normandy

On August 8, 1944, my moment of truth had arrived. The First Polish Armored Division being an integral unit of the First Canadian Army landed in Normandy.

From “Juno” beachhead we moved towards Caen. The regiment advanced through the ruins of the destroyed city of Caen. Caen had been a beautiful mediaeval city. All I saw of it were mountains of rubble.

The order was to reach the areas of Couvicourt, Jort, Trun and Chambois. After advancing for a while the regiment halted, still in an area cleared by Canadian troops.



Troop “Barbara” advancing in the cornfields of Normandy, in the middle tank “Barbara 2”

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

The regiment was in a very forward position now, halted and assumed a standby mode. We had to wait for the American airforce to bomb and soften up the German positions, thus clear the way for allied armor to reach the open country near Falaise.

Friendly Fire

Soon a wave of flying high “Flying Fortress” bombers appeared behind us, their wing tip streams already over German lines. In a short time we heard the rumble and thunder of explosions many miles ahead.



Overturned “Cromwell” tank which leaped in the air due to a close bomb explosion during the friendly fire
 (Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

At this point I must mention two cardinal battlefield rules which were strictly adhered to by my regiment: Whenever the regiment found itself in a standby mode for an extended period, all tanks and vehicles had to be widely dispersed. All tank crews had to dig an oblong shallow hole, at least 70 cm deep and providing sufficient room for five to six soldiers. When completed the tank drove over the hole and we had a perfect shelter against German artillery or strafing planes.

We were standing on top of our tanks, watching through binoculars the dust from explosions raising in the far distance over German lines. Several waves of planes passed over us, another smaller wave was approaching over our position, when all of a sudden there was an explosion. I saw one of our tanks leap off the ground, a shock wave hit me nearly throwing me off the tank.

Everybody yelled “they are bombing us!” and scrambled for the shelter. Bombs kept on exploding all around us, but a distance away from our tanks. The earth shuddered. I could feel the pressure in my ear drums.

Everybody had clenched fists and white knuckles, everybody was praying, it was a two word prayer, “oh God”, repeated many times.

After several minutes the bombing stopped. This was the last wave. Badly shaken we climbed out of our shelter and looked around us. Most of the bombs fell way ahead of our position. We were lucky, three tanks overturned, one soldier and one officer dead. A pale of dust was

hanging over the German lines. It was midday, the word came to be ready to saddle up in one hour, we were moving out.



Burning “Cromwell” tank hit by U.S. Air Force

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

The regiment spread out along its designated sector. We found ourselves in an open and flat countryside. The “Cromwell” tanks of the first squadron, which was my unit, advanced in a staggered line, the lead tank about one kilometer ahead of my tank “Barbara 2”.

For the first time since we left the Caen area we found ourselves inside what only a couple of hours ago was the German line: very many bomb craters, lots of wrecked vehicles, tanks and artillery pieces. The destruction was awesome. I now understood from my own experience and from the scene around me the meaning of carpet bombing.

An order came over the radio to stop and keep a sharp lookout. Through my binoculars I noticed a flurry of movement by what seemed to be several German soldiers around the lead tank. The radio crackled with an order for “Barbara 2”, “Willush to the point on the double.” We drove ahead and pulled up beside the tank of the commanding officer of the squadron (COS). He motioned to me to jump on the rear deck of his tank. The COS told me to speak to this very agitated and yelling German soldier. He knew some German and understood something about “verwundete Gefangene” (wounded prisoners).

I approached the German soldier. He was a “Sanitätsfeldwebel” (sergeant medic). I asked him: “Was ist los, Feldwebel?” (What is this all about sergeant?) Seemingly very upset, he screamed at me: “Ich brauche Hilfe für meine Schwerverwundeten. Da neben dem Haus liegen ungefähr 35 Soldaten, darunter 4 Kanadier und 1 Pole. Diese Kolonne wird nicht weiterfahren, wenn ich nicht Hilfe bekomme. Ich habe genug von Hitler, von Euch und dem ganzen Scheißkrieg! Wenn es Dir nicht gefällt, was ich sage, kannst Du mich erschießen!” (I need help for my seriously wounded. Near the house there are about 35 soldiers on the ground,

including 4 Canadians and 1 Pole. This column is not going to proceed unless I receive help. I am fed up with Hitler and you and this shitty war! If you do not like what I am saying you can shoot me!) I looked at the row of the wounded near a farmhouse and it was a very bad scene.

I returned to the COS, told him what I saw and repeated the conversation with the “Feldwebel”. The COS told me to tell the “Feldwebel” that we will send out a radio message for medical help. While I was talking to the “Feldwebel”, two tank commanders also looked over the situation and returned with some spare medical emergency kits to be left with the wounded.

The “Feldwebel” was still talking to me. He stopped, looked at me quizzically and said: “Du bist doch ein Bayer?! Das hat mir gerade noch gefehlt, mit einem Bayern zu sprechen!” (You are a Bavarian?! That is all I need now to speak to a Bavarian!) Traditionally Prussians do not like Bavarians. From the “Feldwebel’s” accent, I could see he was from Berlin, and it is known that Berliners do not sit on their mouths. I felt he was trying to figure out what a Bavarian is doing in the Polish army. At that time I was still speaking German with a broad Franconian accent.

He walked back with me to my tank and gave me this parting shot: “Du weißt, Gefreiter, wenn die Engländer uns bombardieren, dann ducken wir uns. Wenn die Deutschen Euch bombardieren, dann duckt Ihr Euch, wenn die Amerikaner uns bombardieren, dann ducken wir uns alle.” (You know lance corporal, when the English bomb us, we duck, when the Germans bomb you, you duck, when the Americans bomb us, we both duck.)

In my narration the following should be noted: The way the German sergeant medic talked about “my wounded”, as if it was his family. The sergeant addressed me with the German “Du”, which is only used with somebody close or family, otherwise it must be “Sie”. It is unheard of that a prisoner of war addresses his captor in this colloquial manner. I had to make a judgement call and decided to let it pass, in view of my own experience of being bombed by the American 8th Air Force. I realized the German sergeant was shell-shocked and in trauma from the American bombing.

Regarding the wounded Canadian and Polish prisoners of war we were told later that they were taken prisoners a few days earlier. After the bombing of the German lines, the Germans withdrew, taking their walking wounded with them and left the sergeant medic behind in charge of the seriously wounded.

Advancing in Normandy

We advanced in the direction of Couvicourt, Jort, Trun and Chambois. Fighting was heavy. My regiment with its very fast “Cromwell” cruiser tanks was a reconnaissance unit. It was our job to sniff out what was ahead. After a while I got used to “riding point”, meaning one tank advances a distance to reconnoiter, stops and investigates, while the other two tanks watch out and the next tank leapfrogs to the point.

In the course of action many prisoners were taken. As a tank unit we could not cope guarding prisoners. I usually told them in German to continue marching to the rear. Some infantry units were always there to take care of them.

During several occasions I had the opportunity to question prisoners of war. It felt very strange when I interviewed the first group. We all thought that I was going to find big secrets, but this never happened.

Face to face with the Waffen-SS



German prisoners, amongst them their Corps Commander Gen. Otto Efeldt (with cigarette in hand) taken captive in the “Falaise Gap”

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

In the middle of August 1944 a very large portion of the German army was trapped by American, English, Canadian and Polish forces in the “Falaise Gap” or “Falaise Pocket”. Waffen-SS units, and foremost the “12. SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend” (Hitler Youth) under the command of SS-Obergruppenführer Kurt Meyer going by the nickname “Panzer-Meyer” fought ferociously to keep a small bottleneck open for the German army to escape. German losses in materials and lives were enormous. It was my regiment, the 10th Mounted Rifles Tank Regiment, that put the cork in the bottle. We took hundreds of prisoners, amongst them a corps commander, General Otto Efeldt.



Normandy, August 9, 1944. Smiling Willie Glaser in the center surrounded by the crew members of “Barbara 2” and other soldiers of the First Polish Armored Division
(Photo: private)

The regiment had to make bivouac because we had to look after the mandatory engine maintenance. This provided us with a badly needed break. During the day prisoners were brought in to be processed to the rear. There were about 40 prisoners, most of them belonged to the “SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend”, all being very young, ages 18 to 19. I told the ranking Waffen-SS officer that I will interrogate every prisoner, and at my signal he has to send one soldier at a time to me.



German soldiers surrendering in the “Falaise Gap”

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

My usual routine was to ask for military identification. I did not have much time for extensive questioning. That was taken care of by the intelligence section in the rear echelons.

As another soldier stepped up to me, I asked for the name of his unit. He answered “Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend”. I looked at his ID and nearly dropped it: His place of birth was Fürth in Bavaria!

Usually I kept the interrogations of the POWs on a frosty but correct level. Now I was at loss of words and used a different approach. In my broadest Franconian Fürth dialect I asked him:

“Nisten die Störche wieder auf dem Schornstein?” (Are the storks nesting again on the chimney?) Every inhabitant of Fürth knew about the storks nesting on a unused factory chimney. Come spring, everybody watched out for the storks to return from their winter quarters in some warmer country.



The storks in Fürth are still nesting on the same chimney in 2004

(Photo: Margaret Marks)

The SS soldier swallowed hard and blinked with his eyes. He got completely confused when I asked some specific questions about Fürth, which could only be asked by somebody who has lived there. When I told him being interrogated by a Jew, I delivered to him a real knockout blow.

I talked to a few more SS troopers, including the officer, who went white in his face when I told him he was talking to a Jew. I just could see the wheels in his brain going in overdrive.

Later the regimental intelligence officer told me that this particular officer was a veteran of “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler”, Hitler’s personal elite guards, being part of a cadre of battle wise “Leibstandarte” officers to beef up the “Hitlerjugend” division which only went into action in the middle of June 1944. We were also informed that small “Panzer” elements of “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” were in the area.

Finally I had to end my interrogations. I was called to pack, we were moving out again.

It was a very small personal triumph and satisfaction to have dealt this way with members of the “12. SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend”. In 1936, the Glaser family moved to 22 Schwabacherstraße, which was and still is a busy main street in Fürth. Very often during the “Reichsparteitag” (Nazi party rally) in Nuremberg formations of SS units marched through my street. As a young boy I used to watch them from our window on the first floor.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that a time will come when I will be involved in mortal combat with the SS.

The search for the “1. SS-Panzerdivision Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” (1. LSSAH)

I mentioned in the previous chapter, that we were informed about small Panzer units of the “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” being in the area.

Before I begin my narration, it behooves me to give a short description of this unit: LSSAH was Hitler’s own regiment, with a very high standard of selection of its soldiers and very distinct, down to a special cuff band embroidered with the name “Adolf Hitler”.

LSSAH saw combat in nearly every theater of war in Europe. It was badly mauled, nearly wiped out in the Russian campaign. Withdrawn from Russia, it was re-equipped and appeared in the Caen, Falaise and Chambois area, not as a full division, but as small “Kampfgruppen” (fighting units) with “Tiger” and “Panther” tanks. The “Tiger” with its 88 mm gun was an awesome fighting machine. The “Panther” tank equipped with a 75 mm gun was very fast and had superior armor.

As a Jew born in Fürth, Germany, I was very familiar with the local SS units. During “Reichsparteitage” (Nazi party rallies) in Nuremberg many members of the “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” could be seen in Fürth because Nuremberg was only a twenty minute streetcar ride from Fürth. To me as a Jew, the “Leibstandarte” was the embodiment of all evil existing in Germany.

While fighting in Normandy and finding out that units of the “1. SS-Panzerdivision Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” were somewhere around the corner became a matter of personal importance to me.

For an allied soldier the LSSAH was just another tough enemy unit to cope with. It was very different for me. The bad news from Poland about the fate of the Jews there trickled down through various channels, especially the news about the Warsaw ghetto uprising and the destruction of the ghetto by SS units under the command of SS Major General Jürgen Stroop in April / May 1943. The SS was boasting about how many Jews were killed daily in the ghetto. This made me very angry. To the best of my knowledge the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto was the first atrocity of the Holocaust which was publicized in German newspapers. I had high hopes to get even with the LSSAH.

In our area of operations the American and English fighter planes inflicted great damage on German tanks and rolling stocks. This led to a great shortage of fuel for their equipment. German armor moved mostly at night. This had a bearing on the following event.

Towards the end of August 1944 my tank commander was called to a routine operations briefing. Afterwards he briefed the tank crew with broad outlines. Since the time we left Caen behind us I was always asking him: “Anything new with the SS?”

This time when he returned from the briefing, he said to me: "We have to pinpoint some SS Panzers. Indications are they belong to the LSSAH."

He continued: "I know Willush, you have a fire in your belly regarding the SS, but I want you to stay focused when carrying out this particular task."

We sat down, worked out the map co-ordinates and overlays, which as radio operator I had to be familiar with.

Very early the next day troop "Barbara" went hunting.

We approached our area very careful. It was not only LSSAH's tanks, but also German infantry, such as SS Panzer Grenadiers and the "SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend" troops, which were fighting a fierce rearguard action. We had to keep a sharp lookout for them.

The battlefield intelligence we received was the input of airforce, infantry and tank reconnaissance. The German armor during the Falaise gap operation had to hide somewhere. They could not stay in the open. If they did, they were picked up by the English and American fighter planes with deadly results.

We were now near our objective, a road junction with several farmhouses and barns. Farther to the rear was a wooded area. We assumed an observation position, hidden by trees and high bush growth.

The gunner through his aiming telescope, the tank commander and myself scrutinized the landscape in front of us with binoculars. The sun was in our back. That was good for the glint of our binocular glasses would not give away our position.

Where is the German armor hiding? Not in the wooded area, too thinly wooded. The Panzers must be in the houses. We knew from reports that German tanks just barreled through the wall of a house at the short side, thus creating a good shelter against allied Panzer hunting planes.

My commander opted for one of the barns, big enough to hide a tank, easy to knock down a side. He decided to put a HE (high explosive) shell in each structure and see what happened. This involved changing our position very rapidly, because with the first shot we gave it away. The COS was kept informed by radio about our moves.

The first shot was fired into the barn. We observed for a second, the driver gunned his engine, backed up and raced to the next position. We observed again, no movements, no indication of German presence. This maneuver was repeated several times, a shot for each building. Nothing happened. The other two tanks also reported no visible movements. It was time to call the COS for further instructions.

The Germans used the feline family to name two of their tanks, the already mentioned “Tiger” and “Panther”. We often used the name “Cat” in our radio jargon when we talked about these two tanks.

My tank commander was busy plotting co-ordinates on the map, so he told me to radio the COS with the result of our observations. I got on the radio and told the COS: “The pussycat either ran away or does not want to come out and play.”

The COS, who was known for his dry humor answered: “Willush, why don't you send the pussycat a mouse?”

We were ordered to proceed to another map coordinate as soon as Polish infantry units had secured the area and established contact with us.

Later that day we returned to our bivouac area. While driving to our parking area many good-natured catcalls and meows were directed to us. I suffered a lot of humorous ribbings about my “pussycat” radio transmission while standing in line to get the daily rations, as it was my turn to fetch the goodies for the crew. A few days later, I was presented with a young cat sitting in a Waffen-SS steel helmet. There were many stray cats and dogs running around, their owners fled or hiding in the cellar. Horses and cows wandered around in the fields. On a few occasions we had fresh milk. That was when the farm boys in the crews spotted cows with full udders and got busy milking. Anyway, it took a while to live down this unforgettable pronouncement of mine.

In the end my quest for an eyeball to eyeball confrontation with the “1. SS-Panzerdivision Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” did not happen.

To begin with, whatever units of the LSSAH were deployed in Normandy, they were very badly mauled by allied fighter planes. I only learned much later that as a consequence of the these punishing losses the LSSAH was withdrawn from France to Germany.

Izbica

News about the fate of Jews in occupied countries reaching me were catastrophic. At the insistence and urgent request by the Jewish resistance movement in Poland, the Polish Government sent a courier, Jan Karski, into the Warsaw Ghetto. He tried to penetrate the Belzec extermination camp but did not succeed. He was able to look at the Izbica “Durchgangslager” (transit camp). The tragedy is that on March 22, 1942, my mother and three of my siblings were deported from Fürth to Izbica. They either perished there or were sent on to Belzec.

In 1995 I met Jan Karski in Montreal when at my urging Polish community leaders invited him to speak to the Polish and Jewish community. He addressed a very large audience, it was

standing room only. He autographed my copy of his book "To Willie Glaser, in memory of your mother and children".

Breaking even the score

The regiment pressed on with the advance. Near Chambois my tank was riding point. We were in an apple orchard with lots of hedges when the worst happened: My tank was hit by a SS "Panther" tank. For some reason the "Panther" aimed low hitting my tank at the left side between the wheels and tracks, killing the driver and the co-driver.

Immediately the tank commander, the gunner and myself jumped out and stretched out flat on the ground. The other two tanks of troop "Barbara" laid down a heavy smoke screen. We scampered to the rear and got a ride back by the "LAD" (Light Aid Detachment). The next day we received a new tank and replacement drivers.

As the regiment kept up its relentless advance, German "Panzers" tried hard to protect the main body of German units which were able to escape from the "Falaise pocket".

In the vicinity of Abbeville we received information that a number of heavy German tanks was prowling around. We drove towards their supposed location. We just had left a stand of trees and were facing a hilly meadow area with dense tree stands to the left and right, when the troop commander decided that this was a good place to lay an ambush.

We all backed up to the tree line and spread out. The troop commander as "Barbara 1" stayed in the middle, to his right my tank, "Barbara 2", to the left "Barbara 3". Hastily we broke off branches and camouflaged our tanks. The drivers set their engines to the quietest idle.

We fired a short burst from our machineguns and settled down to see if a "Panzer" would come our way to investigate and take the bait. Our hope was that a German tank would climb the embankment and hence expose the soft armored belly for us to take a shot. This was our only chance because our light gun could not penetrate any other place in the superior armor of the "Panzer".

It did not take long until we heard the clanking sound of "Panzer" tracks coming towards our position and the engine revving up to climb the slope.

We were ready. I had loaded the gun with armor piercing ammunition and was sitting low in the turret, only my head showing, my eyes glued to the binocular.

Sure enough a German tank crested right in front of us, thereby exposing the softer armor. The commander ordered the gunner to fire scoring a direct hit to the bottom of the "Panzer", which instantly exploded. Probably the stored high explosive ammunition was hit.

The troop commander's order came over the radio to withdraw at once. We laid down a smoke screen and retreated quickly. Tanks, whether German or Allied, usually traveled in packs and we were not going to hang around. A few minutes later two Royal Air Force "Spitfires" flew low over us towards the German lines and again we heard explosions.

Shortly thereafter myself and the other four crew members of "Barbara 2" were decorated with the "Krzyż Walecznych", the Cross of Valor.



The cover and inside of Willie Glaser's Certificate for the Cross of Valor
(Photos: private)

Tank for tank, now the score was even: My tank was shot up by a German "Panzer" and I survived. In turn I destroyed a "Panzer". Probably there were no survivors.

Later on I reflected on all this and my conclusions were as follows: Whether the name is Horst Müller, SS-Sturmmann, age 19, "SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend", or Willie Glaser, Lance Corporal, age 23, 1st Polish Armored Division, for all of us there was a bullet with our name on it. Only God decided who was to receive it.

My other conclusion was that I laid to rest once and for all the myth in the minds of the many German POWs I interviewed that a Jew is not a fighter. Once I asked a Waffen-SS soldier if he ever read "Der Stürmer" and how "Gauleiter" Julius Streicher would have portrayed a man like me in his tabloid of hatred against Jews? I did not get an answer.



Honor Guard of the 10 PSK at attention at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris after the city's liberation

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)



Honor Guard Parade at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)



Diploma issued by the French Ministry of Defense and the Regional Council of Lower Normandy recognizing Willie Glaser's participation in the Normandy landings (2001)

(Photo: private)

Belgium, Holland, Germany

The regiment headed towards Belgium where I made contact with several Jews from Antwerp. They were hidden and survived in the countryside, amazingly some with very small children, a real miracle.

Fighting continued unabatedly. By now our tank crew was considered to be very experienced. We fought our way into Holland.

The month of November 1944 saw a halt of activities in our sector. The front was established at the banks of the river Maas. The regiment was given a sector near the town of Moerdijk to guard. This was the first time the crew dismounted and took up positions on the embankments of the Maas.

During the night we dug foxholes. The Germans were dug in on the other side, 400 meters away. One crew member was always in the tank monitoring the radio traffic. Our tank was located on the street, as close as possible to the riverside.



Willie Glaser in a foxhole on the embankment of river Maas in Moerdijk, Holland

(Photo: private)

Once I was on radio duty. In the middle of the night a crew member climbed on the tank and whispered: "I think Germans have infiltrated." He pointed to a restaurant at the corner of the street.

Surely there was a very distinctive clicking sound coming from inside the restaurant. Carefully we approached the house, guns at ready. We shined our flashlights through the shot out window. What we saw was unbelievable: A cat on a billiard table frozen in the beams of our flashlights. She must have been playing with the billiard balls. We all felt very foolish.

Sometimes Germans did cross the river at night to probe. There was always some shooting going on along our sector.



“Cromwell” tank at listening post near the river Maas embankment. Note the two track wheels and track parts on the tank’s turret and in front of the tank. Both items were welded on and were supposed to deflect armor piercing shells. Opposite is the building where the cat played with the billiard balls.

(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

We had lots of time to figure out all kinds of alarms and tripwires, some of them very ingenious. The only trouble was that stray cats and dogs tripped the alarm frequently. It was the same on the German side because they used to start shooting without any reason.

Our personal relationships with Dutch people were heartwarming and they still exist today with the annual liberation ceremonies in the town of Breda. But time came to say goodbye to our Dutch friends.

In April 1945 we crossed into Germany. Again fighting was very heavy, the Germans were defending their own soil. On May 4, the 10th Mounted Rifles Reconnaissance Regiment, preceding as usual the 1st Polish Armored Division, faced fierce resistance near the town of Astederfeld. This was my last combat. On May 8, 1945 Germany surrendered unconditionally.

What have they done to my family?

Here I was, Willie Glaser from Fürth in Bavaria, back on German soil. Deep down in my heart I knew that I would never see my family again. I was in contact with my uncle Benjamin, my father’s brother, who in 1935 had emigrated to Palestine. Later he told me that beginning in 1944 he already was sure that my family had perished. Nevertheless, in his letters he was trying to give me hope about the fate of my family.

I just did not understand how my Christian playmates from Blumenstraße, when we were five and six years old, could be guilty of such crimes. After all I came to their houses after playing “Cowboys and Indians” where their mothers fed me a “Butterbrot” (bread and butter) with marmalade. “Franzl” and “Fritzl” also came to my house to get a slice of my mother’s “Apfelkuchen” (apple cake).

Everybody knew we were Jewish and there never was a problem. When I visited my grandmother in Königstraße, I loved to stroll to the fire station, which was situated right behind my grandmother's house. It was a big thrill to help the firemen cleaning their fire engines. They knew I was Jewish. They helped me climbing into the driver's seat. I was so proud and wanted to become a fireman when I grew up. Were these firemen also guilty of the atrocities inflicted on their Jewish neighbors?

In Fürth everybody knew everybody. My grandmother was well known as Ester Glaser, the shoemaker's widow. When I accompanied her to the market, many men took off their hats or caps in a friendly greeting, ladies said "Grüß Gott, Frau Glaser!" (How do you do, Mrs. Glaser?). Were all these people directly responsible for the murder of my family?

Occupation, demobilization and emigration

In August 1945 our regiment, being part of the "British Army of the Rhine" (BAOR), relieved the Canadian troops stationed in Aurich and the Canadians returned to Canada.



1945, Meppen (Germany). Willie and his puppies
(Photo: private)



Dining room of the barracks in Aurich (Germany). The war crimes trial of SS General Kurt Meyer was held in this room, when the Canadians were stationed in Aurich.
(Source: Regimental History of the 10th Mounted Rifles Regiment, Nuremberg 1947)

In March 1947 the division returned to England and became a semi-military unit, the Polish Resettlement Corps. Later that year the Canadian government invited some 5,000 Polish veterans to settle in Canada. I applied to immigrate to Canada, was accepted and settled in Montreal.

Afterthoughts

Looking back now and reflecting on my extraordinary wartime experience as a Jewish soldier serving in the Polish army, being born in Fürth and living there for most of my young life, it was not difficult for an allied soldier to face his German counterpart. During the war he simply was the enemy and that was easy to deal with.

Soon after the cessation of hostilities first a practical and later on a normal relationship vis-à-vis the German population emerged. But here I was, very confused, very upset, the truth of the Holocaust weighing heavy on my shoulders. My family was and still is constantly on my mind. Then and now, nobody has been able to answer my question: **WHY THE HOLOCAUST?**

New German postwar generations are born, working very hard not to erase, but to always remember the past. In conclusion and as a veteran soldier I make this observation: Today Jews are serving in the “Bundeswehr” (German Armed Forces), today’s Germany is a long way from the “12. SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend”.

Willie Glaser

October 2002, St. Laurent Quebec, Canada



1999, Canada. Willie Glaser, member of the “Jewish War Veterans of Canada”, with his wartime decorations
(Photo: private)



Polish promotion certificate for Willie Glaser. The text reads: The Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland - The President of the Republic of Poland nominated corporal Willie Glaser, son of Ferdinand, not in active service, not subjected to obligatory military service to the rank of second lieutenant of the Polish Armed Forces. Date: May 22, 2000. Director of Department of Cadre, Ministry of National Defense, Brigade General Zbigniew Jablonski, Warsaw, August 2000.

(Photo: private)



Willie Glaser wearing his wartime decorations as a honorary participant in the wreath laying ceremony at the eternal flame on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Holocaust Memorial Day, April 15, 2007. To his left the former minister of justice, Irving Cotler.

(Photo: private)



Willie Glaser at the memorial site of the Armored Corps of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) in Latrun, August 2007. Among 200 tanks from all over the world on display in Latrun, there are two of three “Cromwell” models which still exist today. The third is the one in Bovington (see above). These “Cromwells” were stolen from the British by the Jewish “Haganah” underground army before they pulled out of Palestine.

(Photo: private)

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