

A Minor Miracle

In the face of his physical handicap and a life of near monastic solitude, combined with fifty years as an officer of the Red Army of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the tall and angular General Aleksyi Polenko still considered himself a man of discipline. It was discipline, his father had taught him at a young age, that was primary to an officer's success. His father had also said that discipline should be primary to a soldier's natural inclinations as well.

On a gold chain around his neck, eighty year-old General Aleksyi Polenko still wore the German round that had shattered his right knee in the winter of 1941. It represented more for him than a symbol of luck: it served as a constant reminder to himself of the immediacy and the impartiality of death. His life-long restraint as a soldier had been what led him away from the loathing and self-denunciation that had accompanied the loss of his leg, and had been what lifted him out of his dark and disturbing thoughts after the war finally came to a close.

Using a cane made of strong Siberian oak as a supplement to his artificial leg, General Aleksyi Polenko, as was his custom, slowly walked the perimeter of the army base's central square, watching young soldiers march up and down the quadrangle in the bright morning light. The stiffness of their postures always reminded him of the day he turned six, the traditional first day of a boy's long and often arduous path toward manhood.

A general in his own right in those days, his father, Constantin Polenko, had ordered him to stand at rigid attention—without supervision—for hours in the cold darkness and pouring rain outside their family's home near Victory Square in Leningrad. No matter that the cobblestones in the street were growing sheets of ice, the general had a point of soldiering to make with his young son.

Looking down from a brightly lit second floor window, his father had sat in his study at

his perfectly ordered desk near the warmth of the fireplace, reading from the translated works of Immanuel Kant. Smoking his pipe, he had glanced out at the boy on occasion, using the stem of his hand-carved meerschaum bowl to silently correct the boy's posture from where he sat observing.

General Aleksyi Polenko remembered hearing his mother, Katarina Yelena, berating his father later that same cold November night. Having been silent long enough in the matter, she had carried her soaking wet and shivering son upstairs and towed him briskly until he was rosy and dry. Then she had helped him on with his nightshirt and tucked him into a goose-down bed covered with pure white pillows, scarlet quilts and fresh linen sheets, and hinting of lavender and her husband's tobacco.

General Aleksyi Polenko had never forgotten his mother's display of affection that night, nor did he forget his father's stern but simple lesson. It was not just about a boy's new found understanding that a soldier never abandons his post, it was also about a disciplined soldier standing bravely in defense of the homeland, no matter what battles heaven and earth—or man—may wage.

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Half a century earlier, on a fateful and cold morning in the winter of 1941, the Nazi high command had, in the drive north to Moscow, deployed a division of tanks accompanied by a battalion of troops and an artillery column across snow-banked fields and through the stark forests west of Stalingrad. Himmler's orders to his commanders were to take control of that city through what he and his generals had perceived as a sparsely defended approach.

Somewhere deep in the forest, between the farthest reaches of the old city and the advancing German machinery, Captain Aleksyi Polenko and his bedraggled band of leather

tanners, carpenters and farmers lay waiting. Drained by frigid winds and running low on ammunition, all of heaven and earth seemed to be falling apart around the inexperienced thirty year-old captain and his men. Ordered to sit tight, he and his company had been charged with defending a desolate countryside being ripped apart by bullets and shells and slowly swallowed by heavy snows and blistering ice.

The roar of tanks echoed between the trees, the sounds savage and brutal to Captain Aleksyi Polenko's ears, and at times the guttural shouts of Nazi soldiers floated through. With bullets threatening and the tired and dirty faces of the old men and young of his charge turning to him for reassurance, he knew it was time to steel his troops.

“Pick your targets,” he cautioned. “Aim as carefully as you do with your deer, and waste not a single shot.”

His company of men had come from everywhere and nowhere: bustling cities, nearby villages—some had come on foot over the plains of their motherland that were covered in the summer with wheat and barley. All were huddled together now though, in shallow ice-slickened ruts and behind boulders and trees thickly skirted with snow, shooting at the unknown and hoping with unspoken words each day they would live to see nightfall.

Against the numbing cold, Captain Aleksyi Polenko and his soldiers wore layers of rags under their coats and uniforms and kept their blankets draped around their shoulders at all times. During the lulls in fighting, their rifles required constant movement of the bolt action, to prevent them from freezing up.

Discerning at last that his men's hearts and minds were not in this wretched place, Captain Aleksyi Polenko knew that, without these most basic of commitments, the fight to save the lands of their fathers and mothers from the invading forces would be lost.