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Vistula

By James White
Vistula is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and locales are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is purely coincidental. The training incident described as taking place at Slapton Sands, England, was a factual event, officially called Exercise Tiger. Communication problems and a German attack during the exercise resulted in the deaths of at least 749 American servicemen.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Michael James Fitzpatrick and his pop rock concept album, Love And Hate, about three brothers who fought for the American armed forces during World War II. My collaboration with Michael, writing the story for Love And Hate, became the inspiration for Vistula.
Vistula
by
James White
VISTULA

On a river bank near Warsaw

THEY LINED US ALONG THE TOP OF A STEEP RIVER BANK, a long drop above the river. Thirty of us faced the water, hands tied behind our backs with wire. The men around me coughed, cried and prayed, making low murmuring noises, barely audible. It was cold, of course. It’s always cold in Poland. Even their pathetic summers are a joke compared to Pennsylvania’s hot sultry days.

Across the river, lights from the few buildings still standing in the Zoliborz district twinkled in the weak winter twilight. Shadows hid the bombed-out neighborhoods, the smoke, the smoldering ruins. The pop, pop, pop of small arms fire broke the stillness. I instinctively identified the weapon, a Strumgewehr 44. The sound was strangely comforting, knowing I wasn’t the target.

Blue chunks of ice bumped and grated against each other in the swift current below me. The river would be frozen solid by now if it weren’t for the tons of war waste and chemicals. When the sun reflected off the river just right, the water took on the green tint of anti-freeze.

Listening to the ice, I shut my eyes and composed myself, thinking about my last day at home.
My two brothers and I were skylarking and fooling around downtown Allentown. It was early December, Sunday, the seventh, 1941, and it was beginning to snow.

We'd said we were going Christmas shopping. Papa told us to watch out for pickpockets while mama cautioned us to behave. When we got off the trolley, we saw an Army recruiting office.

While we sat on benches outside Leopold’s Deli with greasy Polish dogs in our hands, everything changed. News about Pearl Harbor came from the deli’s radio. While my brothers argued about what to do next, I ran to that recruiting office and never looked back.

**Allentown**

“WHERE’D THAT COME FROM?” Me and my brothers were on our way to town and I’d gone ahead, mingling with a crowd of families on their way to church. I stopped to stare– a little kid bumped into me. Her mom apologized and gave the kid’s arm a jerk. I paid no attention, because my eyes were riveted on the Army recruiting office across the street from the courthouse on Hamilton Street.

It used to be Dominico’s Five and Dime. Now it was all lit up with soldiers inside and people milling around the door. A poster in the front window claimed, ‘Uncle Sam Wants YOU.’ Considering the season, Uncle Sam kinda looked like Santa Claus, but without the cheery smile.

Most of the shops in downtown Allentown were closed, on account of it being Sunday, but the main streets were all lit up and there was enough going on to keep us occupied.
It started to snow. I pulled down the brim of my cap and buttoned my argyle sweater. My girlfriend, Rosie, had given me the matching sweater and cap for my seventeenth birthday. They weren’t especially warm, but they meant a lot to me. Rosie kissed me when she gave me the package. Right in front of my parents and brothers. I got a lot of ribbing about that later, but I could tell both brothers were impressed. Impressed and jealous.

The aroma of grilled onions coming from down the street made my mouth water, even though it was still officially morning.

“Peanut! Where are you?” My brothers shouted from a block away. Albert and Theo Zewiski were both older and stronger than me. Al, the eldest, was nineteen. Six feet tall, he was the pride of the family. Theo, eighteen, was shorter, but he made up for his shrimpy, skinny frame with a mischievous mind and a flair for sadism.

We had planned to leave right after the eight a.m. Sunday Mass, but Mama made us come home first and have some breakfast. “Save you some money,” she said over a skillet popping with fried eggs and bacon. “Otherwise, you’ll be hungry as soon as you get there and waste your money on food instead of Christmas presents.”

I had to chuckle. That was the story all of us agreed on to keep the peace. Otherwise, our parents would never approve of us wasting our time and money on foolishness like arcade games and Polish sausages from Leopold’s, especially Papa.

The old man rocked in his chair, a cup of coffee in one hand, his pipe in the other, while we gobbled up our food. “Back in the old country, we didn’t have a town to go to, much less any money to waste,” he
said, pointing his pipe at us.

‘Back in the old country’ was Papa’s favorite thing to say about anything we did that he disapproved of.

Theo never missed an opportunity to rebel. “Back in the blah, blah, blah,” he mumbled, crouched over his plate so Papa couldn’t hear.

Mama did, but she rolled her eyes and pretended not to notice.

The old country was a mysterious place to me. My brothers too, or so they said. We knew the name of the town where Mama and Papa grew up, we celebrated the big Catholic holidays with Polish embellishments and we’d learned a few Polish words, but that was it. Mama insisted we speak English in the house and ‘be American.’

We’d been talking more about Poland since the German invasion. Mama cried sometimes when she read letters from her sister in Warsaw. We knew Papa’s uncle had died while fighting the German army, but Mama said we should never to bring it up.

After breakfast, Albert and Theo had to promise they’d keep an eye on me.

“Keep little Johnny safe and don’t let him out of your sight,” Mama had shouted from the kitchen.

I cringed and avoided eye-contact with my brothers. We stood in the doorway, itching to take off. Theo jabbed me in the back and made a smirking noise.

“Yes, Mama,” Al said. “All we’re going to do is some Christmas shopping.”

Papa sucked on his pipe and scowled. He knew Christmas shopping was the last thing on our minds. “Stay out of the way of those cops,” he’d said. He cast a firm stare at Theo. “And you stay out of trouble.”
We promised to be home before dinner.
“Look out for pick-pockets!” was the last thing I heard Papa say as we raced around the corner toward the trolley stop.

“HEY PIPSQUEAK,” Al shouted a second time. “We can’t see you!”

I kept quiet and concentrated on the recruiting office. You gotta be eighteen. They’ll kick me out on my butt the minute I walk in the door. I sighed, then caught sight of Theo.

“There you are.” Theo dashed around a line of children holding hands, all dressed in their Sunday best, and grabbed my shoulder. He followed my stare and regarded the recruiting poster. “You gotta be kidding...”

Al grabbed my other shoulder. His grip tighter than Theo’s. “Whaddya think you’re doin’?” Al was breathing hard. I knew he was anxious. “You get yourself lost the moment we’re off the trolley?”

“I ain’t lost.” I shrugged the two hands off me. Theo motioned toward the recruiting office. “He was lookin’ over there.”

Al studied the brightly lit storefront. “Where’d that come from?” he murmured.

“I know, right?” I said. “Just last week it was an abandoned shell. Those guys move fast.”

Theo laughed. “And it’ll probably be gone tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Al replied and shook his head. He looked at me. “What are you doin’ lookin’ over there anyways? We’re supposed to be Christmas shopping.”

Theo let out with another of his heartless, mocking chuckles. He pulled my cap over my eyes. “I
bet he wants to enlist. Be the hero of the family.”

Al’s eyes got big. “Are you crazy? You’re barely seventeen, in case you’ve forgotten. They’d kick you out on your butt before you got through the front door.”

I straightened my cap. “I look like I’m eighteen and I can lie as good as either of you.”

“Like hell,” Theo said. “With that stupid sweater? You look more like eight than eighteen.”

“Number Two.” I snarled back and punched Theo, but before I could break away, Al grabbed me around the waist and lifted me off my feet.

“Steady, little brother. You’re not getting out of my sight again. What are you so hot under the collar about anyways? The Army’s no place for shrimps.”

“I have my reasons, and I ain’t no shrimp.”

The bells at Saint Stephen’s Episcopal Church tolled through downtown. The jostling crowd began to hurry.

Al brushed snow off his trousers.

I glared at him and took out my handkerchief to wipe my face. I was perspiring in spite of the cold.

“It’s been two years now and I’ve been listening to Papa talk about nothin’ else besides Hitler ever since Poland was invaded. And I think it’s terrible what Hitler’s doing, and...”

“Wait a minute, buster.” Theo tried to pull my cap over my eyes again but I dodged his hand. “Don’t start dreaming about bein’ the family hero. If Papa wants you to save the world, he’ll tell you.”

We all shut up when a girl we knew passed us on the crowded sidewalk. She was wrapped in a warm winter coat with a fur collar.

“Why, if it isn’t the Zewiski brothers,” she said. Her eyes lingered on Al, ignoring Theo and me.
Al nodded and flashed his disarming smile.
“What’s it to ya?” Theo, growled. Eyes downcast, he turned his back on Al and the girl. “I’m hungry,” he said and walked away.

I stammered a lame holiday hello and hoped the snow hid my blushing face. Standing as tall and straight as I could, I wished I brought my winter coat to make me look bigger than I was.

After the girl left, Al gestured for me to follow. “We’re not having much fun standing around here.”

“Hold up,” I said. “I was talkin’ about Mama...”

Albert stopped and gave me an impatient look over his shoulder. “What?”

“Mama cries every night when they go to bed. I hear her through the wall.” I took a step back. “She told me some of her cousins were killed in the blitzkrieg. I don’t care about you, but I’m tired of doin’ nothing about it.”

Al stood silent. The snowfall was getting heavier. He rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Okay, Peanut, you win. We’ll talk it over with Mama and Papa tonight after dinner. Maybe it’s time we did something.”

“They’ll just say no.” I looked back at the recruiting office almost hidden behind falling snow and mist. “Let me just go in and ask what the deal is. I won’t take a second.”

“What’s the big hurry? I tell ya, those guys ain’t goin’ anywhere.” Al started walking again. “Like I said already, we’ll talk to Papa first. All right?”

He gave me one of his ‘end of discussion’ looks. I meekly nodded.

We caught up with Theo at Wanamaker’s. The shop windows were decked out with Christmas scenes and the sidewalk was crowded with gawkers.
We jostled our way through the throng, glancing at a big display of tricycles, phonograph players, dolls, model trains and mannequins dressed in grown-up men’s and lady’s clothes. While Al and Theo argued about which electric train set was the best, I looked back down the street, but the recruiting office was out of sight.

Al shifted his attention toward the gray, snowy sky when an airplane passed overhead, blotting out the sounds of Christmas carols and tinkling bells. Hidden in the clouds, its engines made a powerful full-throated rumble. The vague outline of a multi-engine aircraft appeared briefly, illuminated by the street lights, heading southeast.

“I bet it’s one of those Boeing B-17s I been reading about. It’s probably headed for the airfield in Philly.” After it disappeared, Al took a deep breath and brushed snow off his face. “It has lots of guns and can carry tons of bombs and can fly in all kinds of weather—“

“So what?” Theo retorted.

“So, I’ve been thinking about maybe joining the Army Air Corps. I heard lots of guys are joining up to help the British. They need pilots.”

“Fly airplanes?” Theo looked at his brother, put his hand to his mouth and gave him a mock expression of surprise. “You never said anything.”

“Always wanted to,” Albert said. He turned away and continued looking in the window. I could tell he was a little embarrassed. Theo could embarrass anybody.

“You won’t find me in one of those death traps,” Theo shook his head. “No room for error, people shootin’ at ya and the consequences of a mistake are fatal every time. No siree, not for me.”
“Can it,” Al said without looking at his brother. “They got parachutes. Lots of guys bail out of disabled planes. Happens all the time.”

Theo grunted. “Out of the frying pan into the fire, if you ask me. I bet a lot of those parachute guys wind up impaled on the end of a telephone pole.”

Al withdrew into a menacing silence.

I sensed trouble brewing, so I piped up. “I’m joining the Army. Stayin’ on good ol’ terra-firma. Maybe in a fox hole one night and in a captured chateau the next. I’m gonna help liberate Poland from the Nazis, just like Mama wants—”

“Will you shut up about the Army?” Theo cut me off. “Enough war stories. I’m hungry.”

I punched him. “Just ‘cause you don’t have any plans, Number Two.”

Theo shoved a handful of snow down the back of my neck. I turned and kicked him.

“I do so have plans,” he answered. “They’re just not all about armies and bombardiers and war.” He pointed up the street at a grill set up on the sidewalk outside our favorite deli. Sausages popped and spit over red coals.

“You idiots can share your war dreams. I plan on having one of those. Maybe two.”

It was our favorite deli because it had a Polish name, Leopold’s, which happened to be Papa’s name. I bet Leopold’s food wasn’t any different than all the other delis in Allentown, but we wouldn’t eat anywhere else.

When we stood around the grill, we heard a radio announcer inside talking in a shrill voice about casualties and damage at an American Naval base called Pearl Harbor. The base was on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. There was a lot of
static and he kept talking about Japan and a sneak attack. The customers in the deli were quiet. Even the Salvation Army guy on the sidewalk stopped ringing his bell and had his head in the deli’s front door.

“What’s happening, Peter?” Al said to the cook as he poked at the grill, full of kielbasa, bacon and buns warming along the sides.

Peter was a big guy. He stood impassively in a grimy tee-shirt, sweating over the coals and smoking a cigarette. The falling snowflakes melted immediately as they hit him. He shrugged his shoulders and never looked up. “Who cares. Not in my neighborhood. You want sauerkraut with that?”

We all nodded and glanced at each other, worried looks on our faces. Something dreadfully wrong was happening, but we didn’t know what it was all about.

We took our food to a bench in front of the hardware store, two stores down. The street sounds had changed. The Christmas atmosphere was missing. Half-way through our dogs, Al grunted and looked at Theo. “So where’s Pearl Harbor, mister know-it-all.”

“Hawaii,” Theo said, sauerkraut juice and mustard dribbling out the corner of his mouth. “It’s an island in the Pacific Ocean. They got volcanoes. I saw pictures in the National Geographic Magazine. The women do this dance called the hula-hula. They wear grass skirts with no tops.” Theo looked at me like he was sharing a sinister secret. “Didn’t Mister Larson teach you that in geography?”

“No tops?” Al scratched his head. “I think I’d remember that.” He looked back at the deli. “I guess it’s a big deal. That announcer sure is excited.”

I didn’t know what to think. Why were the Japanese bombing our Navy base? I thought they
were fighting the Chinese. I wondered if any of the ladies in grass skirts got hurt. The thought of bombs exploding in the middle of a bunch of ladies dancing the hula-hula with no tops made me squirm.

People on the sidewalk had stopped strolling and were talking to each other in huddled clumps.

“We ought to think about going home,” Al said. “Find out what Papa knows.”

Theo shook his head. “Keep your shirt on. I’m still eating, damn it.”

“Don’t say damn it!” Al lashed back at Theo. I knew he was still smarting from Theo mocking his airplane pilot dreams.

“I’ll say whatever I want to say, flyboy. You can fly all the way to grandma’s house as far as I’m concerned.”

The two of them stood up and glared at each other.

I’d lost my appetite. The greasy wax paper, streaked with mustard and pieces of grilled onion, looked ugly and my stomach turned at the sight.

While my brothers postured and argued, I spotted a trashcan in front of the deli.

“I’m gonna toss this and pee,” I said. Not waiting for an answer, I jogged back to the deli. I didn’t dare look back.

That’s when I knew I had my chance. Something serious was happening, getting people all excited and doin’ stuff they wouldn’t ordinarily do. Time to make my move.

The deli customers were still frozen, engrossed in the announcer’s screechy voice. I took one last look back when I slipped in the front door.

Theo kept his face trained on his big brother. Al glanced in my direction. I thought I saw a hint of
sadness in his eyes, like he understood what I had to do, but he didn’t say anything.

Quick as a cat, I ran through the deli and out the back door of the kitchen which led to the alley.

I smiled as I cut through the cars crawling along Hamilton Street in the heavy snow. *I may never get this chance again.* The feeling of freedom was intoxicating.

Safely on the other side, the memory of my brothers dissolved into ghosts like the silhouettes walking along the sidewalk, miles from me now. “Tell Mama and Papa I love them,” I murmured. “I’ll be right back.”

**Claptown**

I SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO THEO.

In three months I was transformed from a shrimp into a soldier. Basic Training and Advanced Infantry Training happened while I waited in endless lines and adjusted to a physically demanding, communal life-style where my most private affairs were the subject of endless banter. But at least I wasn’t alone. My fears were shared by men, not boys, who slept and ate and laughed and cried next to me, all of them just as afraid as I was.

When our company marched across the parade grounds on graduation day, I became Private Zewiski. I was still short and skinny, my wavy blond hair was nothing more than a buzz cut and my big Polish nose was just as big, but now I was a proud member of the United States Army. I looked to my left as we passed our commander in review and smiled as he saluted us. I was part of a dedicated team, all of us trained and prepared for war.
Or so I thought.

The enlistment officer at Allentown assured me the Army was gonna liberate Poland just as soon as we landed in war-torn Europe. I listened to his serious words and nodded enthusiastically while I signed my enlistment papers. Mama would be so proud if she saw me.

Instead of being proud, Mama pleaded with me to come home. Papa never wrote anything. My brothers scorned me for getting them into trouble. Except for Rosie, I didn’t waste my time writing back. We didn’t get a Christmas leave because of Pearl Harbor. All I got was a Christmas card from Mama, and Rosie sent me a picture. The excitement that got me through training had worn off while marching in the miserable piney hills of Fort Benning. Some guys who lived close to the post got overnight passes. The rest of us had to stick it out in the barracks. The cooks made us a Christmas dinner and we toasted the new year with an endless supply of 3.2 beer at the enlisted men’s club, but I was still in cold, wet Georgia.

We all cheered when our orders finally came through, but when we got off the boat in Africa instead of Europe, that’s when I realized Theo had been right all along. Instead of liberating towns and villages, treated like heroes, we baked in a desert sun and huddled behind sand dunes. Our generals fretted and argued while us guys on the ground got whipped by General Rommel and his elite Afrika Korps. Things weren’t working out like I figured.

I wasn’t a bad soldier. I stayed on with the First Infantry Division, the Big Red One we called it, all through that African shit-hole called Tunisia and on to Sicily.

But after Sicily, when the Army reneged on its
promise a second time, I deserted. That’s right, the red-blooded, all-American GI who had enlisted on the day Pearl Harbor was attacked abandoned his post while on guard duty.

Desertion is a serious offense, especially in wartime, and I knew the consequences when I turned my back on my buddies and hid under a blanket in the back seat of a beat-up Vauxhall sedan. Certain death was the consequence. I saw it done one afternoon on the road to Monte Basilio.

We got a brief respite to take a dump and open a can of C-rations. While we ate and kvetched, they’d trussed the poor bastard and stood him in front of a firing squad. Six volunteers. Some non-com read the orders. No blindfold, no drum roll, no last cigarette; just Ready, Aim, End of story. In the name of efficiency, the Army had taken away all the romance from its executions.

But I had good reasons for deserting and I’m proud to say I made it to Poland on my own, which was more than the Army ever did for me. Unfortunately, my circumstances when I got there were not favorable. I was on the run, hiding in a bramble on the outskirts of Warsaw with a squad of Nazis sniffing up my rear.

That’s where Jakub found me. It was springtime, April, 1944.

WORD WAS AFTER SICILY we would proceed to France, then head East and liberate the Polish people, my people, from the Nazi extermination machine before the Ruskies packed off whoever was left to Siberia.

And I was good for that. The reason I got into this rotten war was to help my Polish cousins fight the Nazis. I had promised my mother and even though
she hated me for enlisting, I wasn’t going to welsh on my promise. I forgave the Army for that wild goose chase through Africa and Sicily and made ready to achieve my destiny.

Patton told us we’d be in France by November, then he left the outfit, fucking weasel.

Next thing I knew we were packed on a freighter and heading for England, of all places. Why England? We weren’t even at war with England.

My buddies were all smiles. “British pussy!” they all cheered while we churned our way up the Atlantic. “Fucking cow-eyed, frigid Limeys,” I said back, while Nazi occupied France disappeared over the horizon, off our right side.

When we reached England, my bad attitude was reinforced by fog, rain and mushy peas. Sunny Sicily seemed like paradise in hindsight, despite the bullets.

We were bivouacked on a beach in Dover, south England, playing beach landing games with the Brits. Training they called it. The training wasn’t going to happen for weeks, so in between guard duty and close-order drill on a rocky beach, I spent my furloughs gagging down warm fucking beer in a nowhere town called Slapton, half mile from our encampment. Claptown, as those of us from first Platoon, Company B called it. After a few pints, I often spent my evenings airing my grievances to an uncaring public about being cheated out of Poland.

I WAS WELL INTO MY POLAND rant one night when a guy asked if he could take the empty seat next to me.

I gave him a careless, permissive nod. I could tell he was a Polack. Big ears, fat nose, blond with a
stupid, toothy grin.

“You from the old country?” he says when I took a gulp of my beer. He was wearing civvies.

“And what the fuck do you care if I am?” I replied. I was mildly insulted, somebody calls me out about my ancestry, but I decided to be cool about it.

“No offense. You’re talking about Poland. Just wondered.”

I looked past him, at uniforms plus a few low-slung frocks, packed shoulder to shoulder in the smoky bar. They were playing Glenn Miller. Everybody was close, but nobody looked at each other. Claptown was a nothing, pissant hole, but these days, with us Americans around, it was buzzing with spies, pimps, informants, whores, pick-pockets, you name it, all trying to figure out what we were doing there and how they could profit from it. We were warned not to fraternize with strangers.

I set my pint glass on the bar and took a long drag on my Brit cigarette. It was an adjustment, but I had switched to Players to fit in. “I’m of Polish extraction, what of it?”

“Thought so.” He held out his beefy hand. “Kurkowski. Peter Kurkowski, pleased to–”

I gripped my pint and shook my head. The acrid Players smoke stung my eyes. Things were going way too fast.

“I’ll have a Flowers,” he said to the barkeep. He dropped his hand as if nothing had happened. “What are you having?”

Normally, pimps and queers don’t matter much to me. To each his own, I say. But to tie my homeland with a homo come-on was below the belt. I gave him my slow, side-long glance coupled with a resounding sneer. “I’m not having shit, if that’s what you’re asking.”
A little color ran up Kurkowski’s neck. “You think I’m propositioning you?”

I didn’t dignify his remark with an answer.

“Please, don’t be offended.” He kept on talking. “It was your accent. Reminded me of home. Pojąć?”

I took a long gulp and emptied my pint, Kurkowski’s Polish ringing in my ears. The barkeep looked at me and I shook my head. “Nice talkin’ to ya, Kurkowski,” I said as I got off my stool and lay a crown on the bar.

Two grunts hustled each other to take my seat. In the ensuing scuffle, Kurkowski reached over, lightening fast, and stuck a small piece of paper in my breast pocket. “Likewise, I’m sure,” he said.

Against my better judgment, I met up with Kurkowski four days later.

He had written my name on his piece of paper and said he had news about my Mother’s family, Nowicki, in Poland. In tiny, perfect hand writing, he also said he would stop by the Saint James Church every evening at seven pm. That got me curious. No homo would go to that much trouble. I decided I needed to find out how and why he knew my name and the name of my Aunt. Enough to hazard being accused of having a deviant encounter with a civilian. Such an offense was not quite as bad as desertion, but damn close.

I’d gone by the church a few times to get the layout. It was a crumbling ruin with no discernible features except a front door and a graveyard. When I rattled the door knob, a large, black rat scurried across the threshold and into the yard. I took that as an omen.

It had rained all day and the ever-present fog and smell of coal-burning blanketed Claptown. After
making appearances at the bar, I made my excuses and stumbled out.

I was so paranoid somebody would recognize me, I changed clothes. On my way to the church, I ditched my uniform in a warehouse and got into some slacks and a dress shirt. I added a fedora and a pair of fake glasses to complete the disguise.

My wet civilian clothes stuck to me while I struggled to change, hopping on one foot, grabbing a hand-hold in the dark and nearly toppling over crates of empty bottles.

Cold and uncomfortable, I made my way along the town’s only paved street, avoiding the few streetlights and keeping a sharp eye out for MPs. A reprimand kept running through my head, ‘Halt, soldier, what the fuck you doin’?’

“Private Zewiski.”

It was his voice, but it came from nowhere. I stared into the shadows that shrouded the church door when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“It’s me, Peter.”

I turned around and he pulled a hood back from his face. It was him all right, with the same toothy grin.

I had a speech and a set of demands all ready, but before I could get a word out he shook his head and put his palm in front of my face. He didn’t waste time with small talk.

“Your Aunt Elzbieta is alive, but barely, living in a Warsaw apartment.”

I stared back at him, bewildered, my speech forgotten. “How do you know–?”

“She’s ill and her two children are being taken care of by a neighbor. I regret to report your Uncle died some months ago. Heart attack.”
He paused, listening. Poised, ready to fight or flee, like a cat.
I looked around and saw nothing. "Why are you telling me this?"
Kurkowski trained his eyes back on me. "I’m associated with a Polish resistance cell. We’re recruiting volunteers."
I could barely hear him. "Volunteers?" I whispered. "Did you say volunteers?"
He nodded. "We have information that you, John Zewiski, have close family relations with residents in Warsaw."
"Volunteers for what?"
Kurkowski’s smile evaporated. His blue eyes gleamed in the pale light. "Warsaw is being systematically destroyed, block by block, and its inhabitants massacred. The Nazis have killed all the Jews and now they plan to level the city. Those of us that can are undertaking a resistance, but we need help. Your help."
"But me myself? What can I do? I was supposed to be there with the Army."
A movement, a rustling sound came from somewhere. "Next time eight pm," Kurkowski whispered as he pulled his hood back over his head. He turned and disappeared into the shadows that covered the grave yard.
"Is there someone out there?" A voice came from the church door. "Can I be of any assistance?" The door opened and a shaft of light stretched across the grounds. A figure in a cape stopped at the threshold and shined a flashlight.
"Damn." My heart beating hard against my chest, I turned and sprinted up the gravel path back to the road. I didn’t stop or turn around until I squeezed
myself into the crowded bar. The fedora and glasses I
tossed in a trash bin next to the bar’s door. I lost track
of where my uniform was.

Civvies weren’t allowed off-post, but it was a
minor infraction. I figured if I was collared, I could
get away with it by acting like I was embarrassed
about a date with a local lass that went bad.

I stood at the bar, head down, nursing my pint.
My mind spun in a thousand different directions.
Aunt Elzbieta and Uncle Bazyli, now deceased.
Should I write to Mother? My two cousins, helpless
children caught in a raging war of annihilation. How
did Kurkowski know these family details? It was too
weird to believe, but what if it’s true? My own flesh
and blood, huddled in some bombed-out building,
waiting to be the next victims. I still didn’t know how
or why he knew my name and the name of my Aunt.
Should I take the chance to meet Kurkowski again?
Was I being drawn into some sinister subterfuge?

“Zewiski.” A heavy hand slammed down on
my shoulder. I nearly spat out my mouthful of beer.
Sputtering, I turned around and stared into the boozy,
beet-red face of my sergeant.

“No civvies off post. You know the rules.”
Sergeant Sturgis weaved, but held steady, thanks to
my shoulder. He looked me up and down. “Article
fifteen offense. Wartime. No exceptions.”

“Sarge,” I whined. My trousers and shirt were
still wet, I noticed I got the buttons wrong on my shirt
and it was half un-tucked. Conversations around us
lowered an octave. “She wanted me to meet her folks.
All nice-like, ya know? What was I supposed to do?”

“You’re supposed to wear your uniform.”
Sturgis gave me a wicked smile. “Changed your tune
about them cow-eyed Limeys huh?” He looked at his
buddy, another sergeant from A Company.

“Bust ‘im,” the asshole said. He leered at me. “Fer wearing civvies and for not knowing how to wear ‘em. You look like a slob, Zewiski.”

Sturgis rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to have to fuck with the paperwork, Zewiski. Training maneuvers start tomorrow, five am. All passes are canceled. I’m putting you on guard duty for the next two weeks straight. Report to the duty officer tomorrow, eighteen-hundred hours. Got that?”

I nodded. Instead of responding, questions, strategies, contingencies swirled behind my eyes.

“Say it.” Sturgis stuck his big mug straight into my face, his beer breath stinging my eyes. “Say it so’s I can hear it.”

Like a good soldier, I got off my stool, stood up straight, shoulders back. “Yes Sergeant!” I replied.

I needed answers, but I didn’t want to wind up staring down the barrels of six standard issue, thirty-caliber M-1 rifles.

Problem was, the answers lay a half-mile from my location. How do I get there without arousing suspicion? Kurkowski, said he’d show up at the church at eight o’clock every night, but for how long? Fucking with the duty officer was a dangerous gambit, but I had a few tools I could use to facilitate a brief disappearance. Bribery was always effective, so was intimidation, plus I had a few personal leverage points I could lay on certain individuals. I weighed each option carefully while I walked back to my tent.

“Psssst, Zewiski.” Behind the familiar voice, an object arched over the perimeter fence and landed a few feet in front of me. When it landed with a clang, footsteps crunched across the rocky shoreline and faded into the night.
I walked over the object and looked around. I didn’t see nobody so I scooped it up in one smooth motion and stuffed it inside my tunic. A metal tin. No bigger than a pack of cigarettes.

_Aunt in serious danger. Volunteers departing in one week. Leave yes/no answer. Nothing more. I wait for your reply at this place._

I studied the handwriting and compared it with the paper he gave me. It was him all right. Volunteers? So I’m not the only one? Serious danger now? What does that mean?

Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no. Such a simple answer. With so much at stake either way.

I was tempted to throw the box away. It was starting to sound too cloak and dagger to be serious, yet he knew my family’s names. I couldn’t explain that away. One way or another, I needed to find out.

The first few days of training maneuvers had gone miserably well. We spent our time riding LSTs in and out of the waves, marching through loose gravel with a full pack and getting soaked. After that, I would take a ride back to camp, change and march guard duty for four more hours.

Then everything went to hell. We were told to be ready for a live fire exercise. Big deal, but some idiots got the disembarkation times wrong and, while we slogged through the waves, what was supposed to be a training exercise with bullets over our heads turned into a carnage. People were getting shot all around us. We spent the rest of the day pulling wounded and dead men off the beach. And, because we were short handed, I had to do double shifts of guard duty.

After my second shift, I stumbled into my rack completely worn out, physically and emotionally. All I could think about were the poor bastards I dragged
off the beach and my family being slaughtered in Warsaw. How could I come home if Mother found out her sister and children were all dead?

“Where were you, Johnny?” I could hear her say it. “You left me to save them.”

The next day, as if things couldn’t get worse, German submarines attacked our LSTs during another exercise. They tore up and sunk a bunch of them, leaving hundreds more men screaming and dying in the flaming water. Our camp turned into a morgue.

And to top it off, the officers ordered us to keep the screw-up a secret. No apologies, no memorial services, no chaplains, no nothing. Morale in the camp sunk to an all-time low.

While on another double-shift of guard duty, I wrote ‘yes’ on a scrap of paper, stuffed it in Kurkowski’s box and threw it over the fence where I had found it. I was too exhausted to care anymore and what did I have to lose? A ‘Yes’ answer kept my options open and I could refuse once the time came.

Guard duty turned into a walking nightmare filled with visions of the cold, dead faces of men I had been drinking with just a week ago. Staggering down the fence line, I struggled to keep awake when a red signal flare zoomed skyward and burst into a cone of sparkling stars. It came from the direction of the shoreline. Immediately, shouts echoed across the compound and searchlights swept the beach. A siren wailed.

Guards were supposed to keep to their posts in the event of an incident and I stood still, rifle at ready, waiting for my eyes to adjust after watching the flare and looking for movement in the pitch black void on the other side of the fence line. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and my exhaustion was
temporarily replaced by adrenaline.

“Psssst, Zewiski.”
The fence jerked back and forth once, twice.
“Halt!” I shouted. I took aim at the fence. “Who goes—”

“Shush!” Came the reply.
A weak beam of light illuminated a hole in the fence at ground level. A pair of hands held the cut fence open. “Through here. Quick.”

With all the hubbub going on, I had forgotten about the tin and the message and Kurkowski and Warsaw. I wasn’t prepared to make a decision. “I don’t know, Kurkowski.” I bent over so I could hear better, looking for his face. “I could get into trouble...” When our eyes met, my anger and frustration took over. Those fucking generals. All those men dead. My Aunt sick and her children helpless...

The adrenaline was wearing off. The camp was on high alert. Everybody was keyed up. I could feel it. People all excited and doin’ stuff they wouldn’t ordinarily do. It was now or never.

Kurkowski reached through the hole and grabbed my arm. I didn’t resist.

“We’re just over the hill here, crouch down.” Kurkowski half pushed, half carried me across the gravel and over the berm that separated our encampment from the only road in town. The search lights swept the shoreline, but didn’t reach us. People were dodging up and down the road. Parked on the shoulder, a dark sedan sat, headlights off, motor running.

The rear door opened and Kurkowski pushed me in. I landed spread-eagled on the back seat and a blanket settled over me as the car lurched into gear and moved onto the road. It was warm and cozy.
For more information on Storylandia, Issue 27, “Vistula”

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Private Johnny Zewiski stands above a polluted river, his hands tied behind his back. It's a cold afternoon in war-torn Warsaw, Poland. In front of him, beyond the river, smoldering ruins echo the sound of small arms fire. Behind him, a Nazi machine gun crew hastily assembles their weapon, anxious to finish the execution and get back to shelter.

Ex-private, actually. Johnny had deserted his post and fled his Army unit under wartime circumstances, thereby sealing his fate, no matter who took the trouble to capture and put him front of a firing squad. He fled with honorable intentions, he thought, but the war didn't care about honor.

His only friend, Jakub, another displaced Polish-American, stands next to him, kvetching about unrequited miracles.

Johnny's journey, from his boyhood home in Allentown, Pennsylvania to Warsaw, is a crazy ride of miraculous encounters. It begins in Tunisia, then across the North Sea, through the heart of Nazi-occupied Poland, and winds up in the arms of the embattled Polish resistance who are desperately trying to defend their capital until the Allied armies can save them from the Nazi onslaught.

He dreams of home while waiting for the bullets to fly; his mother and father who cried while their former homeland turned to rubble, his brothers who warned him not to go near the recruiting station and his girlfriend who followed him in his tortured dreams and begged him to come home.

When the machine gun fires, Johnny's fate takes yet another turn and he begins a new journey that's just as dangerous and ill-conceived as the last.