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I MEET THE FRONT-LINE RUSSIANS

BY LILLIAN HELLMAN

A brilliant American playwright was accorded a rare honor: The Soviet sent her from Moscow to within rifle range of the Russian front lines. Her account of whom she met and what she saw makes absorbing reading.

PERMISSION to join the Red Army somewhere on the Warsaw-Vistula front had come through the week before, but Ria (who was coming along as translator) and I had been waiting for good flying weather. On the seventh cloudy Moscow day we decided to take a train. Although that meant a long detour (we had to go down into the Ukraine to Kiev and then back north and west again to Lublin, Poland) Ria said we would make it in two days, but the Red Army major who was coming along with us as guide and protector said he thought maybe two and a half days. They were both wrong. For five days the train crawled across the devastated country and, as time stretched out, I grew dirty and tired and sad.

There was little water on the train and less heat, and I had learned that it hurts to wash your hands in snow and does little good to clean your teeth with cold tea. I was tired of canned sardines and elderly sausage, and the ends of bread seemed no older now and no more frozen than I. If I had not felt so sorry for the cheerful white-faced baby in the next compartment, I might have had time to feel even sorrier for myself.

Five days of looking out of a train window into endless devastation makes you sad at first, and then numb. Here there is nothing left, and the eye gets unhappily accustomed to nothing and begins to accept it. Everywhere along the roads the people are dragging themselves back to what had been home and is now seldom more than a piece of a building surrounded by bomb craters. We have just pulled out of Kowel, which is on the Russian side of the Curzon Line. Kowel had been a large, thriving railroad town when captured by the Germans in 1941 and taken back by the Russian armies in 1944.

Nothing Left to Look At

The train was on a siding for two hours, so we had plenty of time to look at Kowel, or to look at nothing, because there is nothing left: the fine railroad station is now a wall and in the distance there are only little pieces of walls that were houses. I started to go for a walk but I found out that you can't stroll over hills of broken concrete, bricks, wire and mangled iron. I got as far as a clearing where Red Army soldiers were buying food from peasants. I bought some mashed potatoes—glad to have anything hot—a large onion and some apples and was once more impressed with the friendliness of the Russians: People came to translate, to help me pick the best apples, to make proper change, and three soldiers hurrying back to their trains carried my packages for me.

Sunday—yesterday afternoon—the train finally pulled into Lublin. We were met at the station by a Major Zeidner from Army Headquarters. In the disorganized railroad station, with too many excited people meeting too many other excited people, I began to admire Major Zeidner and to understand the Red Army. Within ten minutes we were out of the station—there had been a few minutes delay while we all looked for our Moscow major, who is a rather vague character—and into a shabby but pleasant hotel.

The stove in our room had been heated since the day before, there were large pitchers of hot water and a fine dinner with a bottle of wine. The hotel was heavily guarded by soldiers in a courtyard and on the staircase, but I was too sleepy to wonder about that. The next morning it all began to puzzle me, and when I had thought about it a little while, I knew why: We were the only people in the large hotel.

At breakfast I said to Zeidner: "Major, I know the Russians are wonderful hosts but I can't believe you have taken over the

(Continued on page 68)



