

Ocheret, Mikhail Yosifovich

Lance Corporal

On the outskirts of the city of Zhitomir, a son was born to a tailor Yosif Ocheret in 1926. The child's birth certificate recorded his name as Mikhail, but the family called him Munya. The boy studied at Public School Number 23. He was one of the best chess players in the school, a keen sportsman and he loved to read — especially travel books.

Munya hardly had finished the eighth grade when the war broke out, and the 15-year-old boy was caught in the maelstrom of war and its effects.

The Ocheret family found itself in the Novaya Zhizn kolkhoz in Saratov oblast. There Munya began his studies at the "agricultural college" of practical experience. He demonstrated his energy, inquisitive nature, and diligence. At first he was given easy tasks to perform, such as carrying water to the field and bringing wood from the forest. He soon became attached to the horses and later worked in the blacksmith shop. Everyone loved him, from the chairman of the kolkhoz to the miller in whose house the Ocheret family lived.

1943. Munya Ocheret was called up by the Red Army and fought with his battalion in the 990th Infantry Regiment, 230th Infantry Division from the Dnieper through the Visla to the Oder rivers. It was in Germany that the 19-year-old soldier accomplished the feat which won him the title, Hero of the Soviet Union.

It was cold in eastern Germany in February 1945. Dense fog covered the entire area, crept along the ravines, hovered over the Oder valley. A biting wind penetrated ones bones. The infantry battalion of the 990th Regiment had crossed the river and captured a village. It was engaged in a fierce battle to maintain and extend the bridgehead. The enemy launched an attack to force the battalion back from the river. The Oder River was the last big water barrier on the way to Berlin.

The platoon of the 7th company in which Lance Corporal Ocheret served was assigned to guard battalion headquarters and took up positions in Karlsbisee. The commander warned that the Germans were preparing a new attack and

that the bridgehead must be held. By morning the Soviet army was going to cross.

Artillery and mortar shells disrupted the morning silence. Ocheret's unit was positioned at a crossroads from which the men could fire and observe. Under cover of fog the Germans sent in two battalions of infantry and 15 tanks. After a softening up by German artillery, the infantry and tanks were able to tear through the defense and move toward Karlsbisee. The battalion headquarters were threatened: if headquarters were destroyed, the battalion would scarcely be able to hold on to the bridgehead.

The Soviets were outnumbered. Deafening explosions could be heard, buildings were burning, smoke was spreading. The wind opened the curtain of fog and Ocheret saw enemy tanks nearing his position, their guns bursting with flame. Once more he checked his grenades, arranged them around himself and held his breath in anticipation of the head tank. A column of Germans was approaching and the narrowness of the street prevented their maneuvering. It would be enough to put the first tank out of commission and the column would be halted. The column was nearly alongside them when he threw the grenades at the tank moving towards him. A deafening explosion shook the street. The tank seemed to stand still but began to move — directly towards Ocheret.

Had he missed his target? What about the bridgehead? So much blood had been sacrificed to capture it! His comrades would be in a hopeless situation if the battalion headquarters were destroyed. Ocheret seized his grenades and threw himself under the tracks of the enemy tank.

The demolished tank blocked the road and the column slowly turned back. The battle had been won. The bridgehead was safe.

On May 31, 1945, Mikhail Yosifovich Ocheret was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, posthumously, by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

After the war, the parents and sister of the Hero moved to a one-story house at 88 Lenin Street in Zhitomir.

His mother takes the only photograph left of her son from an envelope: a handsome, shining face, smooth black hair, searching eyes, a gentle smile on the lips — a very young boy. At that time he was 15 years old.

In the unit where he served, Lance Corporal Munya Ocheret's name is included in the roll call and the men respond:

"He died a heroic death for the benefit of his people."

At the entrance to the building of Zhitomir School No. 23 there is a plaque with the inscription: "Hero of the Soviet Union Mikhail Ocheret studied here from 1934 to 1941."

Source: Gershon Shapiro (Ed.), *Under Fire, the Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1988 pp. 415-417