

Forzum, Yakov Tsalevich

Private

Yakov Tsalevich Forzun was born on November 4, 1924, in the town of Korostyshev in Zhitomir oblast into a working class-family. He served in the Red Army from August 1942 and from October of that year was at the front. One day in 1945 a typical Sholom-Aleichem "Motl, the Cantor's Son" type of youngster entered the office of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. His name was Yasha, son of the carpenter Tsali from Korostyshev. He was 20 years old or, as he said, nearly 21. Forzun himself recalled:

"My father was a shoemaker. He left three of us small children with my mother and went to Stalino in the Donbass. From that time on we lived between Korostyshev and its spas, and Stalino with its coal mines.

I finished first grade in a Jewish school in Korostyshev and second, third and fourth grades, also in a Jewish school in Stalino. My mother did not want to move to Stalino. She missed me so much and I missed her, so I returned to Korostyshev and got my first job with a tailor. But to become a good tailor you have to study the trade for a long time. And I had to help support my mother. She had a bad heart and could not work. I became a porter and carried suitcases of those who came to the spas. In this way I earned enough for us to live.

One day I caught the attention of workers at the City Soviet. They appeared to like me and gave me a job as a messenger. I stayed with them for a year and then decided to become a tinsmith. My uncle in Zhitomir worked at this trade and once when he came to visit us he took me with him to Zhitomir. I soon became good at it. I rented an apartment, brought my mother to Zhitomir, and then war broke out.

On August 6, 1941, my mother and I, with knapsacks on our backs, left Zhitomir on foot, and at one of the railroad stations we boarded a train and arrived in Kiev. From Kiev we were evacuated to a kolkhoz in Barvenkovo where I worked and my mother was safe.

The front lines came closer, and once again we were forced to evacuate. We went to another kolkhoz near Rostov, where they gave us housing, and I became a tractor driver's assistant. When the Germans approached Rostov, we were evacuated to the Chkalov kolkhoz in the village of Lomovka in Penza oblast. I worked as a tractor driver until I was called up by the army in August 1942. For my work at the kolkhoz, I received flour, meat, fat and honey, which I gave to my mother. I went to the Military Commissariat. They sent me to Ulyanovsk where a tank regiment was being formed. Three months later I was transferred to the infantry school in Chapayevsk and after five months of study we were sent to the Bryansk Front.

I was a machine gunner and in the fighting at Karachayevo station I was seriously wounded in the head, chest and side.

After five months in the hospital I returned to the front, was wounded again, sent to the hospital, and on recovering returned again to the front.

In June 1944 I was transferred to a machine gun company in the 67th Infantry Division, 23rd Corps, 6th Army which was in action at the 1st Baltic Front.”

The forces of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Byelorussian Fronts and the 1st Baltic Front were mounting operations to liberate Byelorussia. Troops of the 6th Guards Army and 43rd Army of the 1st Baltic Front were ordered to strike in the direction of Beshenkovichi north of Vitebsk and cross the West Dvina River.

This was June 22 1944 three years after Fascist Germany had attacked the Soviet Union. Exactly at four o'clock in the morning, troops of the 6th Guards Army started to pound enemy positions near Sirofino north of Vitebsk with artillery and mortar fire.

For 50 minutes the earth trembled with explosions. The German positions were shrouded in dense smoke. It seemed as if one's ear-drums would burst from the deafening noise of gunfire and shelling. Then there was silence, as if everything around had died. Suddenly came the command:

"Forward! Advance!"

The fierce spirit of the Soviet troops was so strong that the Germans were unable to hold back the tide advancing toward them.

The first enemy fortification line was broken in a matter of minutes. This was followed by an assault on the second line of defense. Hand to hand fighting broke out in the dugouts: rifle butts, knives and fists were used.

Next was the third enemy line of defense. The Soviet attack was so unexpected that the Germans panicked, running in vain from side to side seeking an escape.

By the morning of June 23, 1944, Soviet guardsmen had dug in at Sirotino. Among the first was the 20-year-old machine gunner Yasha Forzun.

Continuing their pursuit of the enemy, units of the 23rd Infantry Corps reached the West Dvina in the morning of June 24 and fought all day to make the crossing.

The commander of the 199th Infantry Regiment received the order to cross the West Dvina and he selected a group of valiant men. The plan was for them to cross the river under cover of darkness, reach the enemy rear, cause panic by their sudden assault, and, taking double advantage of the confusion, to seize a small bridgehead that would enable regimental units to cross.

The group selected by the commander was Lt. V. Tarlovski's platoon which included Sergeant Major V. Zhilin, Private Ya. Forzun, and Sergeant V. Zaytsev.

They made a raft of boards and planks and hid it behind a floating snag. Piling on their cartridges, grenades, automatic weapons and firmly tying down their machine gun "Maksim" to the raft, they pushed off from the shore.

The morning was foggy and they succeeded in crossing the river and arriving at the opposite bank unobserved and unharmed.

Having had advance information from intelligence on the enemy defense locations, they quietly crept up to the site. They came upon three German soldiers in camouflage. The Soviet soldiers seized them from behind, covered their mouths with one hand, and plunged their daggers in with the other. Afterwards they surveyed the area, reached the enemy rear, and set up their combat position.

As soon as the first signs of daylight appeared, Forzun opened fire with his machine gun and his comrades with their submachine

guns. This fighting at the enemy rear was the signal for the regimental units to start crossing the river, but the Germans went on to the offensive, and the units were forced to return to their side.

The courageous foursome remained engaged in battle with the Nazis, who relentlessly pounded the handful of men. The Soviet guardsmen repulsed the attacks, and the Germans retreated, leaving many of their men lying dead.

In the unequal fight three comrades were killed. The only one left was machine gunner Forzun, who collected the cartridges of his dead friends and continued to fight off the German attacks. In the course of the fighting, Senior Lt. Seregov and another soldier who had also remained on the west bank joined him.

From morning to late evening Forzun and the two soldiers repulsed 11 attacks. In the evening the units crossed the river, and Forzun was united with his battalion. He went on to fight for the liberation of Latvia and Lithuania.

On July 13, once again, he was wounded seriously.

On July 22, 1944, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union to Yakov Tsalevich Forzun, machine gunner of the 199th Guard Regiment, 67th Guards Infantry Division, for courage and valor displayed during the crossing of the West Dvina River.

This proclamation was read to Forzun by the head of the hospital where he lay recovering from his wounds.

Completing his story, Yakov said quietly: "It's such a pity that my poor mother didn't live to see this." He then rose, adjusted his crutches under his arms and, accompanied by his 70-year old uncle, left the room.

After demobilization Yakov Forzun worked as a foreman in Zhitomir but never forgot his native Korostyshev where he often visited his old friends.

Source: Gershon Shapiro (Ed.), *Under Fire, the Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1988 pp. 130-133