

Mashkautsa, Shabtai Mendelevich

Sergeant

In the small town of Orgeyev, deep in the hinterlands of Bessarabia, there lived a simple Jew, the painter Mendel. His soft-spoken wife Rakhel was a specialist in preparing meals "from nothing." Apparently, his ancestors had been Jewish farmers from the village of Mashkauts and hence the name, Mashkautsan.

In 1924 a son was born to the Mashkautsans whom they named Shabtai and affectionately called Shepsel.

Like all the Jewish children in the town, Shepsel went to *cheder* and helped his father.

In June 1940, units of the Red Army entered Orgeyev. Bessarabia, which had belonged to Rumania up to that time, was annexed to the USSR.

Exactly one year later, Hitler's Germany, in league with Rumania, went to war against the Soviet Union. In the skies above Orgeyev, German planes released their lethal bombs. Fires broke out, homes were destroyed. In their cellars old men, women and children were killed. Whoever was able to, fled.

Seventeen-year-old Shabtai volunteered for service in a rifle battalion, which was soon attached to the 50th Reserve Infantry Regiment. There he underwent basic training and carried out different tasks in a communications detachment: he repaired damaged cables at front lines and helped lay pontoon bridges across the river. He was hungry most of the time and slept in snatches on floors.

In February 1942, when Shabtai was 19 years old, he was assigned to the 530th Anti-tank Regiment, and it was with this regiment that his remaining war years were spent. He fought with the regiment at Taganrog, Melitopol, and the Crimea. Near Melitopol he found himself alone pitted against 10 Fascists, of whom he succeeded in killing 6. In the Crimea he received his first military award — the medal "For Valor."

Through the fields, forests and mud of Byelorussia the road led straight to Berlin via East Prussia and Poland. Moving with his regiment along Polish

soil, Mashkautsan came upon the concentration camp of Maidanek, a place filled with horror: piles of human hair — the Germans had stuffed mattresses and furniture with it; human skin used for women's handbags and purses. Bags on shelves contained neatly assorted women's and men's shoes and children's boots. Millions of pairs. Millions of shadows clouded his eyes — shadows of his brothers and sisters who had been killed.

April 1945. The regiment stood at the approaches to Berlin. A sleepless night was waning. Faint traces of dawn had already appeared. Mashkautsan approached a gun and gazed steadily through the sight. Berlin was a stone's throw away. There cannons roared, while here, in the forest, there was silence.

Seven artillerymen were positioned on the spot. For several hours they had alternated standing guard at the battery commander's telescope with great wonder. "What the devil are we burning here?"

Captain Chigrin, battery commander, approached them:

"A stiff fight is facing us," he said. "Mechanized enemy troops are trying to break through to help their men in Berlin. They will most probably try to make a breach in the highway. We will place three guns there to hold them back; otherwise, they'll strike a blow at our rear."

Chigrin came over the Mashkautsan.

"Sasha" (this was what they called Shabtai at the front), "I'm counting on you."

Soon the sounds of firing could be heard from beyond the forest.

"It has started," thought Shabtai. The road, as before, was quiet, but, all the same, something seemed to illuminate the lake.

Suddenly a bullet flew past Shabtai's ear. Then another and another.

Bullets were coming from the rear; from fifty meters back on both sides of the road. The Germans had set up two mounted machine guns.

They got around us, the bastards. Open fire! One shot, two, and the end of the ammunition. They had been seven, now only two survived — Mashkautsan and Gorbunov.

"Sasha, tanks! Behind us!"

It was difficult for the two of them to turn the gun around, but necessity is the mother of invention.

"Shoot, Sasha! Aim for the lead one!"

"Take it easy, Gorbunov, let them come a little closer."

The artillerymen held their own. Toward the end of the day the Regimental Commander Lt. Colonel Danilchenko arrived at the position held by the two heroes. He quickly glanced around the field of battle where enemy tanks and self-propelled guns were still smoking. Shaking the grimy hands of the two soldiers, he said in a trembling voice:

"Thank you, comrades!"

"We serve the Soviet Union," said Gorbunov, but Shabtai remained silent.

"What's the matter with you?" asked the Commander.

"He doesn't hear well, Comrade Commander. He's deaf from his own grenades."

Danilchenko came closer, embraced the two, and said:

"Boys, the war will soon end. Try to stay alive. Tomorrow I'll send replacements."

The Awards List arrived at headquarters:

"On April 29, 1945, near Meningsee in a Berlin suburb, a young sergeant with the 530th Tank Destroyer Regiment carried on a battle with 200 Germans and two self-propelled guns... Twice he changed positions under enemy fire, set fire to one self-propelled gun, then the second, which had come right up to his position. After putting the guns out of commission, Sergeant Mashkautsan began firing at the infantry. As a result he killed 50 soldiers and officers by gunfire and 4 by pistol fire.

The enemy hurled its tanks and armored carriers with infantry against this section. Again he opened fire; with two shells Mashkautsan hit a tank and right after that one of the armored carriers.

The second armored carrier rolled toward the gun, and when it was 2 meters from it, Mashkautsan hurled a grenade and then, in spite of a contusion, again opened fire on the enemy. More than 200 dead Germans were left in the field. Sergeant Shabtai Mendelevich Mashkautsan deserves the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

Signed, Regimental Commander — Lt. Colonel Danilchenko"

Sergeant Shabtai Mashkautsan wrote about this battle in the army newspaper *Krasnoarmeyskaya Pravda* (Red Army Pravda) as follows:

“As many as 500 German soldiers with tanks appeared near our position. They tried to cross the highway to join the other units. Scores of Germans and tanks came at me like an avalanche. I quickly aimed at the first self-propelled gun and set it afire with two shells and then opened fire on the infantry.

A grenade fell near the gun and my assistant was wounded. I became deaf, but my eyes were fine. Grabbing my pistol, I shot at the Germans and then threw a grenade at the group of Nazis approaching me.

Silence — but not for long. The Germans tried again to hurl their tanks and armored carrier with infantry against us. They formed a ring around us. The bullets whistled and the shells roared, but we did not lose our presence of mind. Exerting all my strength, I turned my gun this way and that and peppered them with shells. A German tank was stopped in its tracks 100 meters from us. Then an armored carrier burst into flames, but the infantry was practically upon us. I threw an anti-tank grenade at them and received a contusion during the action.

How the battle proceeded I don't know, but I do know that not one German passed my gun.”

Fortunately, the contusion was not serious. After a short time in the hospital, Shabtai was back among the cartridge cases and, like other Soviet soldiers, then triumphantly inscribed his name on a wall of the Reichstag.

The Soviet government highly valued the feat of the artilleryman during the fighting near Berlin. On May 27, 1945, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR awarded Sergeant Shabtai Mendelovich Mashkautsan the title Hero of the Soviet Union.

When the war ended, the modest Jewish boy from Orgeyev returned to Bessarabia and settled down in Kishinev. When he was interviewed, he seemed uncomfortable. Sitting in front of him were journalists with notebooks asking one question after another — as if he were someone of great renown.

"What is there to write about?" he asked. "We all fought."

"Don't say that. Not everyone fought in the same way."

"Is that the point? I understand that those who died, who are not among us anymore... they deserve something special. But us? It is enough we remained alive."

It was pleasant to look at the young face, expressing well-being and honesty. Blonde, tall, broad-shouldered, long arms, a childish embarrassed helplessness. The face of a small-town boy, gray-blue eyes. Faces of this kind are frequently encountered in these places —just as one hears Jewish songs mixed with Moldavian melodies.

Source: Gershon Shapiro (Ed.), *Under Fire, the Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1988 pp. 397-401