

Indeed, all the misfortunes of the 7th Company began the day Corporal Górny was killed.

A connection, impenetrable to human logic, seems to exist between certain events, as if the world were a unified mechanism, wherein the movement of even the tiniest particle can cause an unexpected reaction of the whole. Those same couplings that link a train crash to a loose screw in the metal rail, also appear to link it to a hare leaping over the track in front of the train as it hurtles towards annihilation. Every sailor, every airman, every miner, railwayman, fireman or soldier: all brothers in water, air, earth, fire and the animal instinct to fight, in the elements that make up the totality of our being, will always consider it proven that the most trivial deed, bah! careless word uttered at a “wrong moment” in the incomprehensible tangle of chance events that is their life, has a mysterious power to determine the success of their actions, and even the existence of their bodily shell. There are no arguments with which to explain to them that a third cigarette, lit with the same match, cannot influence the direction of a bullet or a photograph affect the efficiency of an aeroplane engine.

For faith is always something other than knowledge, and thought – something other than experience.

In this case too, no sage would have been able to detect a rational connection between Górny's death and the disasters that began to plague the unit not long afterwards. Because today it can be stated above all, impartially and categorically, that the dead corporal played no distinguished role in the company whatsoever. On no occasion during his lifetime did he display those combat and organisational skills that began to be attributed to him only later. Neither did his aspirations and passions have any influence on the unit's fate. What is more: None of all those people who so enthusiastically took part in the moving tributes to the dead man had shown any interest in him before his death.

For Górny had lived without drawing attention to himself. The best proof of this was that no one could remember later when he had first appeared in the company. The one certainty was that his vast figure was already showing up at roll-calls and parades in the Łódź barracks, with its calm soft elephantine movements, bright round face fresh as a peach, and absent-minded blue eyes, like those of child roused from sleep on a sunny morning.

He would always arrive last and stand in the line of non-commissioned officers in his slightly too small peaked cap, from under which straight wisps of never combed hair strayed onto his white forehead, in his green ‘Wehrmacht’ tunic with its wide slit over the buttocks, and huge brown boots like stove-pipes reaching high above the knees. The boots were always so highly

polished they looked like new: only their shape as well as dark patches visible here and there on the uppers were clear evidence of their origin with the Prussian Death's Head Hussars. It never occurred to his superiors to point this out to him, question him or punish him: no conversations with him ever went beyond stereotypical military reports or communications. Perhaps because he was conspicuous by his unusual calm and taciturnity, and taciturn people are able to command respect for their individuality. Another aspect of his personality was his immense mildness. It was this character trait that recruits recognised quickest and best. Punitive drills under his command were simply a pleasant stroll in the moonlight. Whenever he was in charge of sweeping the yard or the street in front of the barracks, cleaning latrines, scrubbing floors or stairs, any man could excuse himself from work, so that in the end the corporal was left only with those who were too stupid to ‘follow’ or were intimidated – which can often happen – by the delicacy of the non-commissioned officer.

Excerpt translated by Ursula Phillips



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