

# Mendl Mann

## *The Fall of Berlin*



TRANSLATED AND WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY MAURICE WOLFTHAL



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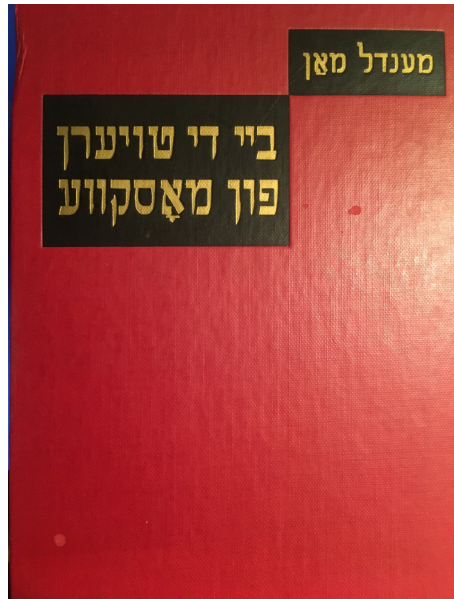
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Cover design: Anna Gatti.

# At the Gates of Moscow

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Cover of *Bay di toyern fun Moskv* [At the Gates of Moscow], New York: Alveltlekhn YidishnKultur-Kongres, 1956.

October 1941. The Germans have occupied Poland and invaded the USSR. Menakhem Isaacovitch, a Polish Jew who fled the Nazis in 1940, is warmly welcomed by the villagers of Tengushay and is now called Mikhail. As the German onslaught threatens Moscow, he is called up by the Red Army, along with local ethnic Russians, Mordvins, Bashkirs, and Tartars. The young artist, twenty-two, longs for his hometown. The destruction of Poland and its Jews, and now the devastation of the USSR, drive him to seek revenge on the Germans.

When the recruits arrive at the reserve camp, Commanding Officer NKVD man Akim Suzayev learns that Menakhem is Jewish and offers insidiously to do him special favors. But Menakhem insists that his only wish is to fight on the front with the men of Tengushay. They are sent by train towards Moscow where the remaining population freezes, starves,

and struggles to prepare its defenses. Antisemitism rears its head in the city with the slanders that Jews are draft-dodgers and war profiteers and are living lives of luxury in the eastern republics.

The men of Tengushay are assigned to the 316<sup>th</sup> Infantry, commanded by a Jewish general, Pliskin. Menakhem meets him just outside Moscow, the first Jew he has seen in a long time. Near a field hospital he meets a wounded Jewish soldier who informs Menakhem that the Germans are exterminating the Jews in Smolensk. Exhaustion and fever land Menakhem in the hospital, where he meets Anna Samuelovna Korina, a Jewish nurse from Moscow. Romance grows between them. Menakhem asks for paper and a pencil to do some drawings, which are admired by some officers. As he leaves the hospital, Anna tells him that she has just earned her medical degree. She asks him to visit her mother in Moscow when he catches up with the 316<sup>th</sup>. The troops are poorly fed and armed, already demoralized by the collectivization of the farms and by Stalinist repression.

Mid-November. When he reaches his unit, news comes that the Germans have broken through Moscow's outer defenses. The men welcome him warmly, and they push on towards Moscow. As the roar of battle comes closer, *Politkommissar* NKVD Nikolai Zhillin orders the men to stop the Germans at all costs. To their shock, a line of Siberian troops with machine guns stand right behind them. Zhillin orders them to shoot any infantrymen who desert or retreat.

The German Willy Ropp is taken prisoner in the battle, carrying a letter for Division headquarters. Menakhem, Adrian, and Zakhar are told to take him to Vladikino, but the camp has moved on, along with the field hospital and Anna. Famine and chaos rule in Moscow as civilians evacuate and thousands of recruits keep arriving. Rioting erupts in resentment against the well-stocked shops reserved for Party members. Police and NKVD try to maintain order. Menakhem searches for headquarters and runs into Gen. Pliskin, who orders him to take Ropp to headquarters in the Kaluga underground station. Menakhem repeatedly suppresses the urge to kill the arrogant Nazi.

Anna's elderly Jewish mother cares for her five grandchildren in an apartment shared with another family, while her sons are at the front and their wives are at work. She has recently been disrespected and insulted, both by Zinin—her building superintendent—and in public by

strangers in the shops. Rumors abound that the Germans have already won. A pro-German mob carries crosses and swastikas, roars "Death to the Jews," and sings the Tsarist anthem. Zinin welcomes this Nazi sentiment, which he hopes will soon deliver her apartment into his hands.

Menakhem and his men confront the crowd. Seeing the swastikas, the prisoner Ropp runs towards them, gives the Nazi salute, and shouts "Heil!" Menakhem shoots him dead. A battle ensues. Zinin and others are killed. The men find the headquarters. They are warned not to tell anyone about the Russian Nazis they had met. *Politkommissar* Zhillin greets them, reads the German letter, and sends the men to await new orders. Menakhem seeks out Gen. Pliskin, who is delighted that Jews are fighting at the front and tells him in Yiddish that his job is to kill German soldiers. The men have a free day until they are reassigned. Menakhem searches for Anna's house. He sees leaflets that German planes have dropped to incite hatred of the Jews. A foreigner, Menakhem misses his hometown and the company of Jews, but is glad to be alive in Moscow.

Memories haunt him of the Polish countryside, of his father forced to wear the yellow star, and of Tengushay, especially of the village girl, Lioska. Anna's mother greets him affectionately, first in Russian then in Yiddish. He then finds Anna's hospital, where she is now operating on wounded soldiers. Their bond is still strong, and she kisses him as he leaves. Menakhem returns to headquarters, finding that the 316<sup>th</sup> has been sent to the front. Capt. Suzayev again talks to him in innuendoes with phony camaraderie. Col. Petrov reassigns Menakhem to stay at regimental headquarters; his knowledge of German will be useful. He takes tearful leave of his two companions.

Menakhem is assigned to interpret and to interrogate prisoners, and is given instructions how to treat them. The first German questioned is Johann Stimmelmeir. Menakhem asks him if Munich is beautiful, then if Warsaw is. Then the prisoner is driven around to appeal on a loudspeaker to German soldiers to surrender. Menakhem's close friend Frolitch, a peasant from Tengushay, brings a warm letter from Anna at the hospital. Menakhem begins drawing again.

As the battle rages around Moscow, a tank unit arrives. Two of the officers are Jews who want their names changed on their identification, because they fear that their comrades will betray them if they're captured

by the Germans. But Menakhem refuses to change his name. Zhillin sees Menakhem's drawings at headquarters and thinks they may be useful to the war effort.

Two reconnaissance men—one of them Jewish—are found guilty of failing to have cleared a minefield, leading to the death of soldiers. Both are shot. Menakhem overhears Suzayev and others blaming the Jew. He then asks to go on a dangerous patrol in Navilkovo. Suzayev scowls, but Petrov agrees. The mission goes well, but Menakhem returns wounded; Anna treats him. Zhillin shows them newspapers with Menakhem's drawings.

Lt. Col. Tcherkass, a Jew, leads the battalion. When the fighting ends, it turns out that the two men had indeed cleared the minefield, but the Germans had mined it again. Suzayev had wrongly blamed and executed the men. Menakhem returns to the command post. Anna has his drawings in her room. Soviet bombers and tanks are routing the Germans, with partisans playing a vital role. Menakhem heals and returns to the front. On one mission, Petrov reflects on the situation of Jews as a minority. Petrov cites their heroism among the troops; Menakhem recalls antisemitism.

Tcherkass is wounded in a fierce counterattack. Petrov sympathizes with his zeal to kill Germans, but says it is reckless. During a lull in the fighting in Zabori, Menakhem declares tremendous pride in defending Moscow and his wish to remain in Russia after the war. The memory returns of his parents forced to wear the yellow star. Called on to interpret, he goes into shock when he learns of the massacre of 25,000 Jews in Minsk. Petrov is sympathetic; Suzayev is not.

Menakhem again interrogates German prisoners, and one of them, Hugo Rudoss, admits having been in the Jewish ghetto in Minsk. Menakhem flies into a rage, smashes his revolver twice into Rudoss' face, and then orders the guards to take him away. When Suzayev finds out, first he mocks Menakhem for not having killed Rudoss, then he rants incoherently against the Jews. Tcherkass is brought in mortally wounded when he attacks a tank unarmed.

Anna's mother's life in Moscow is a struggle, made even more unpleasant by the Tartar and Ukrainian daughters-in-law whom she has taken in. But she remembers Menakhem's visit affectionately and sees his war drawings everywhere in newspapers and magazines. In



the hospital, *Politkommissar* Zhillin praises the drawings' usefulness to the war effort, but belittles Menakhem's ability to portray Russian faces because, Zhillin says, he's not a Russian himself. Anna bristles at this slighting of Jews.

Then she is summoned to treat Tcherkass in a dugout. But it's too late; Frolitch is overcome with grief. After Tcherkass is buried in the frozen ground, *Politkommissar* Zhillin makes a speech in which he belittles Tcherkass's heroism, calling his action suicidal and reprehensible. Menakhem leaves in disgust. As the winter freeze arrives, Soviet morale soars while that of the Germans plummets. Division Headquarters snatches up Menakhem's drawings as soon as he makes them, and Frolitch begs him to make one of himself, which he does gladly.

At Suzayev's instigation, the NKVD Special Section charges Menakhem with dereliction of duty for having sent the prisoner Hugo Rudoss away without completing his interrogation and without making sure that he reached detention. In the midst of the hearing, Col. Galinkov suddenly asks Menakhem why he didn't join the Polish army that was forming in the USSR, and whether he plans to return to Poland after the war. Menakhem explains that he was not able to complete the interrogation because of his fury that Rudoss had massacred Jews in Minsk. Galinkov sympathizes, but rebukes Menakhem for breach of military discipline and suggests that the Germans may even have secret agents among the Jews. But he drops the charges.

Menakhem is promoted to lieutenant for a series of military actions and is also given a medal; Frolitch celebrates. Anna comes to the dugout to congratulate him. Their affection is great, and she kisses him as she leaves. Menakhem reads the morning announcements from Moscow to the men and goes out on patrols at night. The soldiers in one dugout insult him with antisemitic taunts, and he sends one of them sprawling.

The Vladikino dugouts expand into a military base with a hospital and nurses. Menakhem sees official reports of the German slaughter of Jews in Minsk, Grodno, Vilna, and Rovno—reports that merely call the victims "Soviet citizens." As the Red Army advances, troops who were from west of the front line are deserting. Paranoia in Moscow leads to the pre-emptive deportation of such troops to the mines in the Urals. Menakhem receives a warm letter from Lioska in Tengushay and writes back that he is deeply disturbed by reports of the massacres.

Another German prisoner is brought in for interrogation. He is insolent and says, "I do not talk to Jews." Enraged, Menakhem sends him away on the pretext that he had simply refused to talk. Col. Petrov rebukes Menakhem for not doing his job, thereby possibly endangering the troops. The next day his weapons are taken from him, and he is led under guard to Division headquarters. Col. Galinkov makes disparaging remarks about Jews, accuses him of treason, and insinuates that Menakhem did not join the Polish Army in the USSR for some sinister reason. He then orders a court-martial.

Menakhem hears more antisemitic slurs while awaiting trial. He is interrogated at length, then charged with breach of military discipline. Because of his earlier infraction in the case of Hugo Rudoss—but in light of his heroism in battle—his sentence is to be demoted in rank and to be sent to a disciplinary unit. Capt. Suzayev, called as a witness, says Menakhem is unreliable because of his "foreign" ways and his hypersensitivity as a Jew. *Politkommissar* Zhillin echoes these views, adding that Menakhem favors the company of Jewish soldiers over that of ethnic Russians, and that his drawings indicate a pro-Jewish bias that plays into Nazi propaganda. Col. Petrov merely agrees that Menakhem committed a serious breach of discipline. Frolitch testifies that Menakhem was well-liked by the villagers of Tengushay. The defense argues that Menakhem has the same right to hate the Germans as ethnic Russians do; that the German prisoner's refusal to answer Menakhem had been a provocation; that a court-martial was unnecessary, and normal discipline would have sufficed. Menakhem requests that he be sent to fight at the front line. Instead, he is demoted and ordered to report to the Special Unit in Gorki.

He wanders around Moscow while waiting for the train, comes across Kalmuk soldiers, Tartars, Ukrainians, Cossacks, and sees his war posters on display. He tries to find Anna without any luck. On the train, Nina, a railway guard, invites him to her compartment, offers him a drink, and tries to seduce him without success. Furious, she gets the police to haul him to the Barashovo police station. The train to Gorki leaves while they peruse his papers. A sled takes him past the Tendlag labor camps through Alexandrovo and Krasni-Yar towards Tengushay. He is warmly embraced by the villagers Maria Periferovna and Ivan Ivanovitch, with whom he had lived before the Germans invaded. Lioska runs to their



cottage to greet him. He is moved to tears by the affection she shows him. The pain from his battle wound surges up. The next day he visits Lioska and her mother at home and spends the night with her. They go to the train in the morning, accompanied by Maria and Ivan.

Chaos reigns at the Gorki headquarters. The food is atrocious. The prisoners are Caucasians, Tartars, Chechens... every Soviet nationality except ethnic Russians. Menakhem says there's been some mistake, but to no avail. His deportation to the Urals fits into the NKVD plan to keep suspect soldiers far from the front line. The men in the train from Gorki freeze and starve to death. With the help of others, Menakhem barely survives until they reach the mines. The German Army is bogged down as it retreats from Moscow under constant harassment. Dr. Anna Samuelovna Korina is sent by plane to work with partisans near Smolensk.

