

FACING STALINGRAD

One battle births two contrasting cultures of memory

By Jochen Hellbeck

EACH YEAR ON MAY 9, Russian Victory Day, surviving veterans of the 62nd Army gather at the Vassily Chuikov Primary School in northeast Moscow. At the school, named after their army commander, who defeated the Germans at Stalingrad, they listen to poems composed by schoolchildren in their honor. They tour the building's small war museum before sitting down for a celebratory lunch in the festively decorated veterans' room. As they toast each other with vodka or juice, they shake their heads at the destruction and losses inflicted by the war, and grow tearful remembering the dead. More toasts follow, and before long the group is carried away singing songs from the war, the sonorous baritone of Colonel General Anatoly Merezhko taking the lead.

Behind the long table is an enormous poster rendition of the Berlin Reichstag in flames. After routing the Germans at Stalingrad, the 62nd Army (renamed Eighth Guards Army) marched west, through Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland, to conquer Berlin. One veteran in the room proudly points out that he inscribed his name on the walls of the German parliament building in 1945.

ONE SATURDAY EACH NOVEMBER, a group of German Stalingrad veterans travels to the town of Limburg, forty miles from Frankfurt. In an austere room of the civic center, they convene to remember their departed wartime comrades and take stock of their thinning ranks. Their reminiscences, over coffee, cake, and beer, last well into the evening. The next morning, *Totensonntag*, the National Day of Mourning, the veterans visit the local cemetery, where they congregate around an altar-shaped rock bearing the inscription "Stalingrad 1943." A wreath lies on the ground, bedecked with the flags of the 22 German divisions destroyed by the Red Army between November 1942 and February 1943. Town officials hold speeches denouncing past and present

wars. A reserve unit of the German army provides a guard of honor while a solo trombone player intones the sorrowful melody of the traditional German military song, "*Ich hatt' einen Kameraden*" (I had a comrade).

FOUGHT OVER A DURATION of six months, the battle of Stalingrad marked a tidal shift in the war. Both the Nazi German and the Stalinist regimes went to extremes to force the capture, or defense, of the city that bore Stalin's name. Amidst such intense mobilization on both sides of the front, how did enemy soldiers make sense of the war? What animated them to fight, and to fight on against formidable military odds? How did their views of themselves and the enemy evolve during this critical moment in world history?

Shunning soldiers' memoirs, because they examine war through the distorted lens of hindsight, I am instead drawn to documents from the time of the battle - military orders and propaganda leaflets, personal diaries, letters and drawings, photographs and film reels - which bear the direct imprint of the intense emotions - love, hatred, and rage - unleashed in wartime communities. State archives house few personal records from the war, and so my search for these documents led me to the reunions of German and Russian Stalingraders, and from there to the door-

steps of their homes. The veterans willingly shared their letters and photo collections from the war, but our personal encounters made me aware of something I had initially overlooked: the enduring presence of the war in their lives, and the strikingly different ways in which Germans and Russians engage with war memories. The battle may lie almost seventy years in the past, yet traces of it are powerfully etched into the bodies, thoughts, and feelings of its survivors. I discovered a domain of the war experience that no archive could reveal. This experience pervades the veterans' homes: it whispers through the pictures and artifacts from the

war that hang on walls or are safely stowed away; it holds itself in the straight backs and courteous manners of former officers; it flares up in the scarred faces and limbs of wounded soldiers; and it lives on in the veterans' simple gestures of sorrow and joy, pride and shame.

To fully capture the war's complex, enduring presence required a camera in addition to a tape recorder, and my accomplished photographer friend, Emma Dodge Hanson, kindly accompanied me on my visits. In the short span of two weeks, Emma and I traveled to Moscow and a range of cities, towns, and villages in Germany, where we met nearly twenty veterans in their homes. Emma has a singular ability to record people when they are at ease with themselves, nearly oblivious to the photographer's presence. Shot with natural light whenever possible, the pictures capture the gleam reflected in the subjects' eyes. The richly nuanced images bring out the fine

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wrinkles and furrows that grow deeper as the veterans laugh, cry, or mourn. Studied together, the hours of taped testimony and the stream of photographs we captured portray the veterans residing in their recollections, as real to them as the furniture surrounding them.

We were invited into homes both modest and ornate, spoke with decorated war veterans as well as simple soldiers, and watched our hosts celebrate or silently grieve. We recorded some men changing into parade uniforms that looked huge on their shrunken bodies, and others who showed us the small objects that had sustained them through war and the prison camps. We observed the workings of two contrasting cultures of memory: the haunting shadows of loss and defeat in Germany,



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GRIGORY AFANASEVICH ZVEREV, MOSCOW, NOVEMBER 12, 2009

and the broad sense of national pride and sacrifice in Russia. Uniforms and medals were much more widespread on the Soviet than the German side, and Russian women claimed a more active role for themselves as participants in the war. In German storytelling, Stalingrad often marks a traumatic break in the person's biography. Russian veterans, by contrast, tend to underscore the positive aspect of their self-realization in war, even as they confide memories of painful personal loss.

Soon the veterans of Stalingrad will no longer be able to discuss the war and how it shaped their lives. This makes it imperative to record and compare their faces and voices now. Of course, the manner in which participants reflect on the battle nearly seventy years later should not be equated with the terms in which these individuals experienced the war in 1942 or 1943. Each individual's experience is a linguistic construction, socially shared and historically unstable. Their recollection of World War II thus inherently evolves overtime, reflecting changing social attitudes toward the war. Yet this shifting narrative can provide us with crucial insights: both about Stalingrad itself and the vacillating nature of cultural memory.

DURING WORLD WAR II, eight hundred thousand women enlisted in the Red Army. We met two of them. The first, Vera Bulushova, was born in 1921, the oldest of five children. She volunteered to the front upon learning of the German invasion in June 1941. Her pleas initially fell on deaf ears, but by spring 1942 the Red Army began to accept women soldiers into their ranks. During the Stalingrad campaign Bulushova worked as a junior staff officer in a counter-intelligence unit. By the end of the war she had been promoted to the rank of captain. Both Bulushova and Maria Faustova, another female veteran, showed

had ended. She was wearing nylon stockings. "Darling," the woman sitting opposite exclaimed, "Did you get into a fight with barbed wire?"

When asked about the significance of Stalingrad in her life, Bulushova's terse answer was: "I served in the war and fulfilled my duty. After Berlin I got married." The belief underlying this statement - that the larger interests of the state should take precedent over personal matters - was common among other Russians veterans I spoke to, and it emerges vividly in the image of Bulushova standing below the woven portrait of Marshal Georgii Zhukov, who directed the defense of Stalingrad. (Bulushova was the only veteran to turn down our request to meet her at her home - she preferred to meet us at the Moscow Veteran Association where this picture was taken.) None of the Russian veterans I spoke with married or had children during the war. The explanation was simple: the Soviet army had no furlough policy, and so husbands were simply torn from their wives, and children from their parents, for the entire duration of the war.

Maria Faustova, who served as a radio operator during the war, insisted that she never succumbed to feelings of despair, and that she saw it as her duty to cheer up fellow soldiers. Other Soviet veterans, too, remembered their wartime experience in decidedly moral terms, pointing out that they relied on their willpower and strength of character to fight. Their words echo the mantra of Soviet wartime propaganda, which broadcast stories of how the moral fiber of Red Army soldiers grew amidst the challenges of the war.

Anatoly Merezko was dispatched to the Stalingrad front from the benches of a military academy, and he saw most of his fellow cadets wiped out by a German tank brigade on a sunny day in August 1942. Merezko served as a junior staff officer in Vasily

Stalingrad occupied a special place in his memory: "Stalingrad marks my birth as a commander. Persistence, prudence, prescience - all the qualities required of a real commander. Love for your soldier, and memory of friends who died in battle and whom we often could not bury. It is a holy ground for me." Echoing Merezko, Grigory Zverev claimed he was molded as a soldier and officer in Stalingrad. He entered the campaign as a junior lieutenant and was promoted by its end to the rank of captain, the youngest captain in his unit. When we met with Zverev he had laid out several military uniforms on his bed, unsure which of them would look better in our photographs.

COMPARE THESE RUSSIAN displays of unbroken moral investment and pride with the searching voices and haunted faces of German Stalingrad survivors. Gerhard Münch was a battalion commander in the 71st Infantry Division, which spearheaded the attack on Stalingrad in September 1942. For over three months, he and his men were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, holed up in a gigantic office building near the Volga. The Germans held one entrance to the building, the Soviets the other. In mid-January several of Münch's soldiers, famished and demoralized, laid down their arms. Münch did not court-martial them; instead, he took them to his command post and showed them that he ate the same small rations and slept on the same hard and cold floor. The men vowed to fight on as long as he remained with them.

On January 21, Münch was ordered to report to the army command just outside the beleaguered city. A motorcycle came to fetch him. The wintry landscape through which they drove remained firmly etched in his mind, and he described it to me with halting words: "There were thousands of soldiers who had not been buried.... Thousands. And there was just this small road that crossed through them, and because of the wind they were not all covered with snow. A head stuck out here, an arm there. It was, you know... quite an experience.... When we reached the Army command I got ready to recite my report, but they said, 'No need for that. You will be evacuated tonight.'" Münch had been selected to enroll in a training program for General Staff officers. He flew out on one of the last planes to escape the Stalingrad cauldron. His men stayed behind.

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us the scars of shrapnel injuries that tore through their faces and legs, and talked about the amputations that permanently disfigured other female soldiers in their units. Maria Faustova, who had seventeen stitches in one of her legs, remembered sitting on a suburban train just after the war

Chuikov's 62nd Army, before embarking on a steep military career that promoted him to the rank of Colonel General and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Warsaw Troop forces after the war. In that capacity, he was a key player in the decision to build the Berlin Wall in 1961.

A few days later Munch was briefly reunited with his young wife in Germany. Frau Münch recalled how she immediately noticed the somber mood that had taken hold of her husband. Many German soldiers routinely saw their wives and families during the war. The army granted leave for exhausted soldiers to restore their fighting spirit; equally important, soldiers on home leave were to produce offspring to secure the future of the Aryan race. The Münchs were married in December 1941; while Gerhard Munch fought in Stalingrad his wife was expecting their first son. Many German soldiers married during the war. Lavish print announcements of wedding ceremonies, along with photographs of smiling couples, the bridegroom invariably in shiny military uniform, the bride dressed as a nurse, are preserved in German photo albums of the war. Some of these albums also feature images of captured female Red Army soldiers. "*Flintenweiher*" (gun-wielding broads), the caption reads, indicating the "depraved" standing of these Soviet women

in the eyes of Nazi Germans, who believed that a woman should produce future male soldiers, not fight.

Panzer soldier Gerhard Kollak married his wife Luzia in the fall of 1940, in a long distance ceremony. Stationed in Poland, he was summoned to a military command

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post where a telephone connection was set up to the registry office in Eastern Prussia, where his bride had reported. More invested than Soviet citizens in creating families during the war, Germans had more to lose. Kollak was on home leave for several months in 1941, and then again briefly in fall 1942, to see his baby daughter Doris. He left again for the Eastern Front and vanished in Stalingrad. The hope that her husband was still alive and would one

day return from Soviet captivity sustained Luzia through the final phase of the war and her escape from Eastern Prussia, through Dresden and the bombings, into Austria. In 1948 she received official notice that Gerhard Kollak had died in a Soviet camp. "I ranted and raved, I wanted to smash everything to pieces. These losses, first my homeland, then my husband. Dead in Russia..."

The memories of her husband, whom she knew for two brief years before he disappeared nearly a lifetime ago, haunt Luzia Kollak to this day. She talked about Stalingrad - the city, the battle, the burial site - as a "colossus" weighing on her heart. General Münch, too, acknowledged this weight: "The thought that I survived this place... some kind of fate must have guided me, allowing me to get out of the cauldron. Why me? This is the question that haunts me all the time." For both of them, and many others, the legacy of Stalingrad is traumatic. When we first contacted Münch he agreed to be photographed, but made it clear that he did not want to talk about

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FRANZ SCHIEKE, BERLIN, NOVEMBER 17, 2009

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VERA DMITRIEVNA BULUSHOVA, MOSCOW, NOVEMBER 13, 2009

Stalingrad. But then the memories poured out, and he spoke for hours on end.

As we bid farewell, Münch mentioned his upcoming 95th birthday and announced that he was expecting a guest of honor - Franz Schieke, his former personal aide during the Stalingrad campaign. Münch had learned that Schieke went into Soviet captivity in February 1943, but he knew nothing about his further fate until the phone rang a few years ago and Schieke was on the line. He had been released to East Germany after seven years in a row camp, and he was able to track down his former battalion commander only after the demise of the East German Communist state. Laughing, Münch counseled us not to get Schieke started on his political views should we meet with him. They were, he said, a tad bizarre.

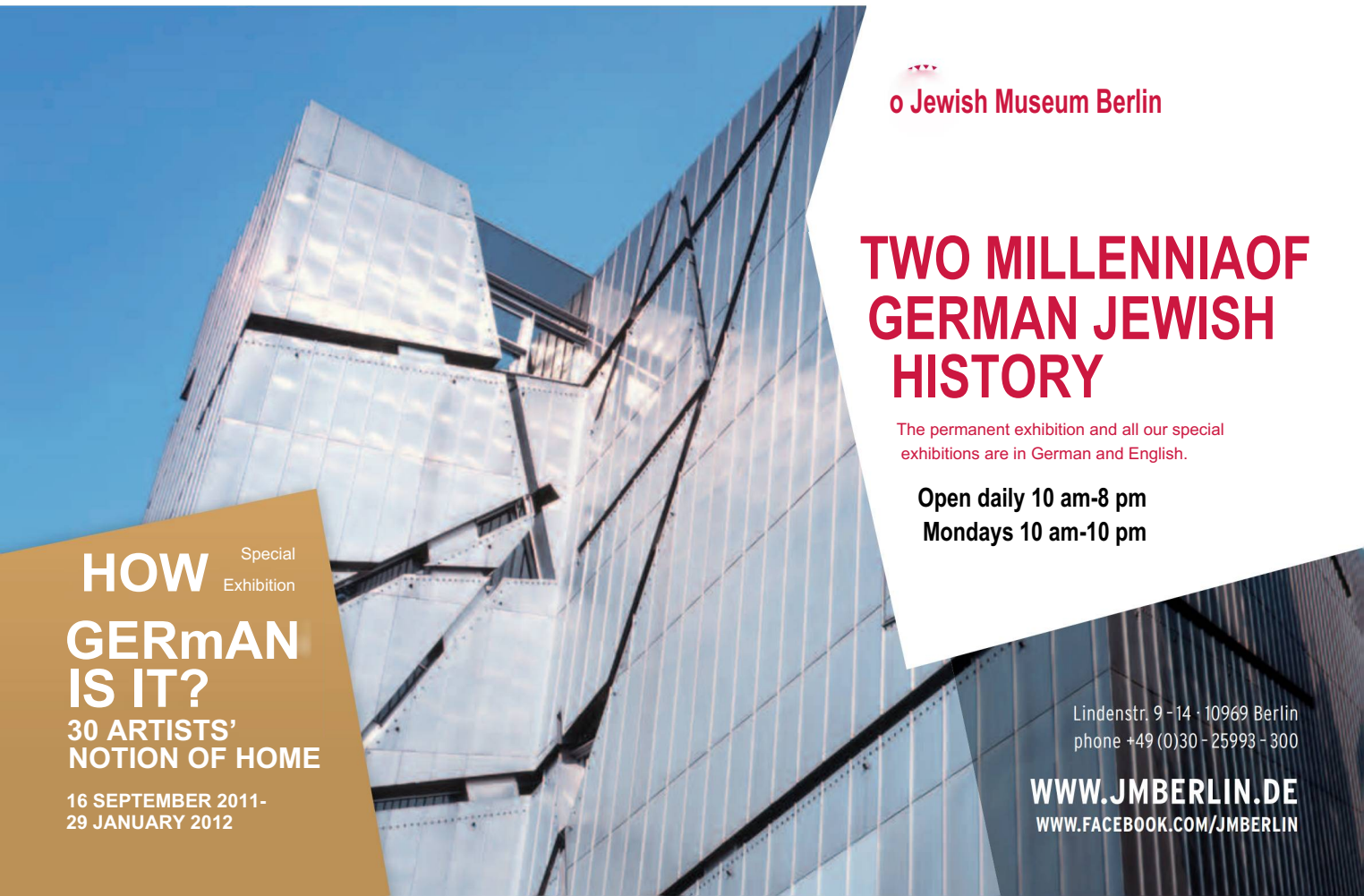
When we visited Schieke's modest apartment in East Berlin a few days later, we were struck by how much his perception of the war contrasted with that of other Germans. Disavowing the language of personal trauma, he insisted on the need to reflect on the historical meaning of the war. "My personal memories of Stalingrad

are of no importance to me. What preoccupies me is that we are not able to come to terms with history. I mean, the fact that I personally got out of there unscathed is only one side of the story." The other side, he implied, was the story of "international finance capital" that profited from wars past and present. Schieke was one of many German Stalingraders who proved receptive to Soviet "re-education" efforts after the war, and he joined the East German Communist Party shortly after his liberation from the Soviet camp. Most of the West German survivors we talked to described Soviet captivity as hell, but Schieke insisted that the Soviets were humane; they dressed the severe head wound he had suffered during the siege of Stalingrad, and they dispensed food.

A marked ideological divide separates West German and East German memories of Stalingrad to this day. Yet the joint experience of the extremes of war also forged strong personal bonds. When Münch and Schieke met for the first time after their decades long separation, the retired Bundeswehr general asked his former aide to address him with the informal *Du*.

AS THEY RECALL the Battle of Stalingrad, both German and Russian survivors cast it as a site of unimaginable horror and suffering. But while many Russians endow their battle experience with deep personal or social meaning, German survivors contend with the effects of rupture and loss. It is essential that these personal recollections of Stalingrad be brought into dialogue with one another. Stalingrad, a pivotal moment of the war and a towering monument in the landscapes of national memory in Russia and Germany, deserves no less.

Towards this aim, I created a small exhibit featuring the portraits and voices of Russian and German veterans. The exhibit opened in the Panorama Museum in Volgograd (the former Stalingrad), a museum exclusively dedicated to the commemoration of the battle. Constructed in late Soviet times, it is a massive concrete structure situated atop the Volga embankment, where some of the fiercest fighting took place throughout fall and winter 1942-43. It was here that Gerhard Münch and his aide Franz Schieke fought for months on



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end, seeking to gain control over the river. Dug into the steep river embankment a few hundred yards to their south was the command post of the Soviet 62nd Army, where Anatoly Merezhko and Chuikov's other staff officers coordinated the Soviet defense and counterattack.

The museum's blood-drenched grounds are considered by many to be sacred, and

These objections were ultimately disarmed, not least by Colonel General Merezhko himself. One of the most senior Soviet officers still living, Merezhko made a point of flying in from Moscow to visit the exhibit in Volgograd. He wore a civilian suit at the opening and gave a moving speech that pleaded for reconciliation and enduring peace between the two nations

but poor health forced them to cancel their travels.)

In terms of sheer human losses, Stalingrad has the stature of World War I's Verdun. This parallel was not lost on observers of Stalingrad in 1942, who referred to the city with a mixture of awe and horror as a "second" or "red" Verdun. Inside the Ossuary of Verdun, the memorial ground administered by the French government, there is a permanent exhibit featuring huge portraits of veterans - Germans, French, Belgian, British, American - who in their arms hold small portraits of themselves during the time of the war. Perhaps one day the city of Volgograd will feature a similar monument that honors the Soviet war effort while gesturing to its human costs, putting it in dialogue with the faces and voices of the former enemy.

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the director initially objected to the idea of an exhibit that would hang images of Russian and German soldiers next to each other. Soviet "war heroes," he argued, would be soiled by the presence of "fascists." He was not alone; a number of local veterans also protested against the projected exhibit, maintaining that the unstaged portraits of people at home, often stripped of their parade uniforms, smacked of "pornography."

formerly at war. Merezhko was joined by Maria Faustova, who arrived from Moscow by train (a nineteen-hour journey) and recited from memory a poem dedicated to Victory Day 1945. The poem details the hardship and losses Soviet citizens went through as they lived through four long years of war; when she reached the stanza devoted to Stalingrad Maria burst into tears. (Several German veterans, too, had wanted to attend the exhibit,

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