

C O N R A D



Conrad Zeitsler felt like a giant as he strolled through the ancient streets of Kharkov, seven hundred kilometers south of Moscow. He was almost a full head taller than his companion, but he held his back straight to squeeze every extra centimeter from his thin frame. In his freshly pressed black uniform with its silver insignia glinting in the spring sun, he looked like a large bird of prey. The impression was heightened by his long face, high, sharp cheekbones and hawklike nose. His pale blue eyes darted back and forth as if he was hunting.

Beside him, his older brother, Josef, was built more like the sturdy, squat tanks the pair commanded. His head was crowned with an unruly mop of red hair, a throwback to some long-ago Celtic heritage. The hair, small nose and sleepy brown eyes made it difficult to believe that the two shared the same parents, yet they did. Conrad had inherited his father's aristocratic

bearing, which had stayed with the family generations after the estates in East Prussia had been sold off. Josef looked like their mother, a small, quick woman with an olive complexion more suited to a Mediterranean climate than the Black Forest, where she had grown up.

Kharkov had not been seriously damaged in the fighting the previous winter; walking between its stately buildings, the brothers could imagine that the war was a long way off. But the war was very close. Uniformed soldiers lounged everywhere, and rumbling columns of trucks and horse-drawn carts clogged the wide streets. The smell of frying sausage, gasoline and brick dust hung everywhere. An air of excited anticipation pervaded the occupying army — the great summer offensive that would end the war in the East was due to start in a few days, and despite the setbacks of the Russian winter offensives, expectations were high.

Germany's war to conquer Europe was almost three years old. Already Poland, France, Holland, Belgium, Scandinavia and most of European Russia had fallen to Hitler's armies led by the elite armored divisions. Conrad, at eighteen, was too young to have been part of those offensives — the coming attack would be his first battle — but Josef, four years older, was already a veteran.

"Being tall may have some advantages," Josef conceded, "but what about all those cuts and bruises you picked up in training? There's not much room in a Panzer Mark IV tank, and armor plating isn't goose down."

“I know that only too well,” Conrad said. “But when I stand in my turret out on the flat steppe, I can see farther than you. I can spot a hidden gully or a camouflaged Russian antitank gun earlier.”

“True. But if I want to be taller, I can stand on a block of wood. To be shorter, you’d have to take a saw to your ankles.”

The pair laughed good-naturedly.

“A few bruises don’t matter,” Conrad went on. “We’ll finish the Russians off this year. They can’t have any reserves left after their losses last winter. We’ll be on the Volga River by August. Then it will all be over. We’ll control Europe, and Russia’s allies will be helpless. America is busy with the Japanese in the Pacific, and Britain will make peace. Simple.”

“Don’t be so sure, little brother. Everyone said the Russians were finished last October, and look at the hard fighting there has been since then. The Volga is a long way off.”

“But we are better equipped and better trained than the Ivans. Even if they have some reserves, we always beat them in open battle.”

“I don’t know. I can’t shake this bad feeling when I look at the maps and see how far we are from home. We travel for weeks and don’t seem to get anywhere.”

“But we will get somewhere this year. Stalingrad — Stalin’s own city on the Volga. Once we get there, we’ve won. Then we can go home.”

“You’re probably right.” Josef pulled himself out of his mood and gave Conrad a friendly punch on the

arm. “It *will* be over this year, and we’ll be washing the dust off our clothes in the Volga long before winter.

“Look, I want to give you this.” Josef held out a black-and-white ribbon, from which hung a silver-bordered black medal — the Iron Cross First Class. It had been awarded to Josef and Conrad’s father in the Great War for “conspicuous bravery” in destroying a French machine-gun nest at Verdun in 1916. Yet it had come at a cost: their father had been shot in the chest, and the wound had become infected. He had survived, but throughout their childhood, their father had been unable even to climb a flight of stairs without gasping. While Conrad’s friends played sports and went hiking with their fathers, Conrad spent much of his time at home tending to an invalid.

Conrad sometimes wondered what his life would have been like if his father hadn’t been a hero and hadn’t been wounded. When he was little, Conrad had loved to sneak into his parents’ bedroom, take the medal out of its silk-lined case and gaze at the imperial crown, the oak leaf cluster and the date, 1914, embossed on the cold metal. He imagined his father the hero charging bravely against the machine-gun nest to save his comrades. But then he thought of all the things his father couldn’t do. Sometimes he found himself wishing he could exchange the medal and all that heroism for a whole father.

The Iron Cross had fallen to Josef, as the older son, when their father had eventually succumbed to his wound in the spring of 1938. Josef, who worshiped his

father, had carried the medal through the victories of his war.

“But Father left it to you,” Conrad said.

“Yes, and I have treasured it. Often when we were in a tight spot these past three years, I’d take it out and think of Father’s war. I’ve always been grateful that we can drive over open country in tanks and don’t have to live like moles in dugouts and trenches. I think Father was a hero just to go through that war, never mind the machine-gun nest.

“Anyway, now I’ve seen and done a lot that Father could only imagine. You are starting out on this road, and I’m not so sure it will be as easy as you think. So take the medal. Keep it close and remember Father’s bravery when you get in a fix.”

“Thank you, Josef,” Conrad said, accepting the medal, “but only as a loan. I will return it to you after this campaign is over.”

“Fair enough.” Josef smiled.

Conrad was honored that his brother was giving him something he held so precious, but the act also confused him. Shortly before his father had died, his mother was out working to supplement her husband’s pension and Conrad had spent the day tending his bedridden father. As he finally settled the old man for what he hoped would be a quiet night, his father suddenly grabbed Conrad’s arm. He had been very sick and his mind’s hold on reality wavered much of the time, but now his eyes were bright.

“Promise me something. When I die — not long now — I want you to throw away that damned medal.”

“Why?” Conrad had asked, bewildered.

“I should have tossed it years ago. Do you know what I see when I look at it?”

Conrad shook his head.

“I see the dead. I see the faces of the three machine gunners I killed.” His gaze drifted across the darkened room to something far away — or long ago.

“Two were killed by the grenade I threw, but the third was only wounded. I could have taken him prisoner — he couldn’t have done me any harm — but I didn’t think of that. I jumped over the sandbags and plunged my bayonet into his chest. He just looked ... surprised. I tried to pull the bayonet out, but it was jammed between his ribs. I pulled as hard as I could, braced my foot against his chest, but it wouldn’t budge. He even tried to help, pushing on my rifle, but it was no use. We just sat and looked at each other.

“The only way to disengage a jammed bayonet is to fire the weapon. This is easy if you are shooting a corpse, but he couldn’t have been much older than you are.” The eyes flickered back to Conrad’s face. “To shoot a man when he is alive and looking at you from an arm’s length is a different matter.

“I fired, of course — there was no alternative — but that boy’s face has never left me. And for that they gave me a medal!” He laughed ironically, and it quickly degenerated into a violent coughing fit. Then the old

man went on. “Funniest thing was, I was shot on the way back to our lines. The doctors dug out a German bullet. It wasn’t a French boy that nearly killed me, it was one of our own.”

Conrad never told Josef what his father had said that night. When he came home for the funeral, all Josef could talk about was his training and how tanks were going to revolutionize warfare and make it again the noble adventure it had once been. Conrad didn’t have the heart to shatter his brother’s illusions when he saw how thrilled Josef was to receive the medal.

But now it was his.

“I’ll look after it,” Conrad said in a choked voice that he hoped Josef would take for overwhelming gratitude.

Josef nodded. “Good.”

The strains of a piano, expertly played, drifted out of a nearby window.

“Listen,” Josef said, waving his hand in the air in time to the music. “Brahms. Now there was a real composer. Much better than your Wagner, with all that doom and death.”

“Brahms was a wimp,” Conrad said with a laugh. “You can’t beat Wagner opera for gods, heroes, battles — it’s great.”

“I admit Wagner’s exciting,” Josef said, “but I prefer something a little more peaceful.”

He raised his hand to stop Conrad’s response. “I guess we’ll just have to disagree on music, but one thing is certain — we’ll never win this war if we don’t get back to our units.”

The brothers embraced and parted, Josef to his battle-hardened crew in Hoth’s Fourth Panzer Army and Conrad to his newly trained crew in the 16th Panzer Division of the XIV Panzer Corps.

“Race you to Stalingrad!” Conrad called after Josef. He was answered with a wave.

As Conrad made his way back to his tank, his father’s words faded. His confidence, his sense of destiny, returned. His father had been only one in a long line of Zeitslers who had fought for their country. A great-uncle had helped defeat the French at Sedan in 1870. A Zeitsler had been an officer in Frederick the Great’s army at the famous victory at Leuthen in 1757, and the family told of a Baron Manfred Zeitsler who had accompanied Frederick Barbarossa on the Third Crusade to the Holy Land in 1190. No wonder Conrad felt proud to belong to the spearhead of a new German army that was sweeping all its enemies before it. He felt lucky to live in such wonderful times.

Now, if only his chest would fill out his uniform, it would be a perfect world.