

# **The Forgotten Soldier Study Guide**

## **The Forgotten Soldier by Guy Sajer**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Forgotten Soldier Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Author's Preface and Prologue.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part One - Russia.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Part 2 - The Gross Deutschland.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 3 - The Retreat.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part 4 - To The West.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 5 - The End and Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>



# Plot Summary

Guy Sajer authors this autobiographical account of his participation as an infantry soldier during World War II. Sajer is of mixed nationality—his father is French and his mother is German. He lives in the Alsace region of France as it is overrun by German forces during early World War II. Sajer faces compulsory conscription and instead volunteers for the Luftwaffe but fails to pass the required entrance examinations. He is then sent to a transportation unit and learns to load and drive trucks. Sajer also meets several other men who will become his close companions throughout the remainder of the war, including Hals. Sajer's unit is sent to the east to supply the German front in Russia. His unit faces considerable difficulty in managing to remain supplied itself and the transportations situation—grave to begin with—is seriously hampered by the freezing temperatures and constant snow. Surviving a few firefights, Sajer reaches the eastern front and resupplies units on the very combat front. Some weeks later an infantry recruiter visits the transportation units and seeks volunteers to enter the famous Gross Deutschland combat division. Hals and other of Sajer's friends volunteer. From a desire to remain with his friends, Sajer also volunteers. The men are given a two-week pass and Sajer attempts to visit his family in France. He is prevented from reaching France by massive Allied bombardments and instead spends his two weeks leave in Berlin. There he calls upon the family of a man he befriended who was subsequently killed in action. The family's neighbors include a teenager girl named Paula with whom Sajer pursues an intense two week romantic relationship. Sajer then returns to his unit and undergoes a brief but difficult infantry training regimen.

Sajer's unit is then sent to the eastern front where it participates in a series of defensive battles and a series of retreats. By this time, Germany is losing the war and the Russian advance appears unstoppable. Sajer reports a mix of propaganda, hope, and hatred of the Russians as the fuel that keeps the Germany army fighting. His unit goes through various organizations and deployments as it continually falls back to the west. Numerous casualties occur in Sajer's unit, including several of his closest associates. Sajer and Hals both receive occasional minor wounds and Sajer suffers several bouts of serious illness. The book relates numerous combat encounters of incredible violence and lethality. By the time Sajer's unit has retreated all the way to Prussia the situation is untenable. The German army is unable to resupply or reinforce, and retreats in massive confusion while the Russian army increases in men and matériel on a daily basis. Sajer and some remnants of his unit, including Hals, end up in Memel where they undergo a prolonged series of defensive battles before evacuating by ship to Kiel. There they are organized into a scratch unit and shipped west to face the approaching British and Canadian armies. Most of the German soldiers by this point—many very old men—are eager to surrender. After a single encounter with the British, Sajer and others surrender. They are treated fairly well. Sajer's particular case causes confusion because he is at first deemed a traitor to France but then is simply allowed to walk away as a liberated French citizen. He joins the French army to rehabilitate his legal standing but is discharged after ten months due to illness.



# Author's Preface and Prologue

## Author's Preface and Prologue Summary and Analysis

The book was originally written in French, the author's native language. Its English translation history is complex, with some material being translated from French into German and then from German into English and the remainder of the material being translated from French into English. The book has been published in several formats in English and has been published in at least five languages. Guy Sajer is the penname of Guy Mouminoux (Sajer is the author's mother's maiden name) born January 13, 1927, in Paris. His father was French and his mother was German. Throughout the book, Sajer comments on his difficulties speaking German fluently and he tends to associate with others who speak French. During 1943 Sajer was living in Wissembourg, Alsace, and either volunteered or was drafted into the German army. On July 18, 1942, Sajer arrives at Chemnitz and enters training with the Luftwaffe. He does not pass the required tests and two months later is transferred to the infantry. He proceeds to Dresden, then to Warsaw, and then to Bialystok where he is billeted at a training camp. He is assigned to a unit led by Feldwebel Laus. In the camp he meets several other recruits who will become his close friends, including Bruno Lensen, Fahrstein, Olenheim, Lindberg, and Hals. Sajer describes some of the training routine and comments on several minor inconveniences of supply and schedule that outrages the naïve recruits. Sajer's unit is part of what he refers to as the 19th Rollbahn. It is a transportation unit that resupplies the front. In addition to basic training, most of the men learn how to drive trucks and other vehicles though the training in this area seems insufficient. After six weeks of training the unit departs Bialystok. The narrative heavily foreshadows the doom that is impending for the German army. The style is retrospective and the author clearly finds his naïve attitude amusing in the light of future events.



# Part One - Russia

## Part One - Russia Summary and Analysis

Part One is divided into three chapters. The section is labeled as "Autumn, 1942." Chapter 1 - Toward Stalingrad focuses on the author's unit's travels from Bialystok to Minsk, on to Kiev, and finally to Kharkov. The journey is made through November and the weather turns steadily colder. The soldiers suffer much from the cold and the temperature is a major preoccupation of the narrative. Most of the journey is made in the company of Lensen, Olensheim, and Hals, who speak French. Also mentioned are Morvan and Uterbeick who is at first friendly but later distant. The initial trip to Minsk finds the soldiers much disgusted with the lack of planning and efficiency—they often miss trains and have to sleep outside and so forth. Sajer states that most of the teenage soldiers find this incomprehensible at first. They eventually board a train composed of many flat cars and stand watch in the weather as the train travels. Sajer, Lensen, and Hals receive an early reprimand from Laus because they are sheltering under a tarpaulin instead of actively watching. Near Minsk they see a train heading west. It has dozens of open flatcars crammed with Russian prisoners. The prisoners have used the corpses of the dead to build walls of bodies on the leading edges of the flatcars to deflect the wind. Sajer and the other recruits are stunned by the savagery of the scene. When they arrive in Minsk Sajer, Hals, Lensen, and Morvan explore parts of the city. They find it heavily damaged but the residents appear polite. The unit remains near Minsk guarding supply depots through Christmas. A few days later Sajer is separated from his closest friends and given an assignment with a smaller detail that drives fifteen loaded trucks from Minsk to Kiev. Somewhere in the voyage Sajer is involved in his first firefight, a brief episode in which a few Russian partisans are killed. After the fight Sajer believes the Germans will help the wounded Russians. Instead they are either executed or left to die. During the voyage food is very scarce and the weather is decidedly cold. Casualties from disease are common. The roadways are littered with the detritus of war. Upon reaching Kiev the truck detail is almost immediately dispatched to Kharkov; however, the detail is reunited with the rest of the unit and Sajer once again enjoys the company of Hals, Lensen, and Olensheim. On the road the unit again encounters partisans and Sajer experiences his second firefight. He finds it confusing. Again, the wounded Russians are left to die. Sajer rides with an older driver, a combat veteran with a knee wound. He learns some tricks about how to survive in the army from the man but feels the older man is defeatist. During one night's stop Sajer assists in the first aid detail and is horrified by the amputations. About thirty miles from Kharkov the truck detail is strafed by Russian planes—the Germans take casualties and lose some trucks. In Kharkov the unit is informed that Stalingrad has fallen. The unit sends and receives mail and takes a one-day break. It is then ordered to proceed to Voronezh. Throughout the chapter Sajer is gradually introduced to the realities of war. From a well-organized and supplied training camp through a series of firefights and a strafing, he finally arrives in Russia and enters the combat zone.



Chapter 2 - The Front discusses events that transpire in a region of the main line of combat south of Voronezh along the banks of the Don River. The unit proceeds from Kharkov to Voronezh and then uses four-wheeled Russian carts to ferry supplies to the front. The winter is bitterly cold and fresh snow falls nearly constantly. For two weeks the men perform hard labor dragging supplies eastward. During this time injuries are common, some men go insane, and one man in the unit commits suicide. Hals, Lensen, and Sajer manage to stay together on the same details. They are frequently under artillery fire while taking crates of food and munitions forward to the actual fighting units. Afraid, Sajer finds the sarcasm of veteran combat units perplexing and is amazed at the confusion and chaos of battle. The German army holds the west bank of the Don River; the Russians the east bank. Every night the Germans lob artillery into the river to shatter the frozen ice, thus forestalling a Russian advance. Supplies are quite short. After a few weeks the weather begins to turn. The temperature increases rapidly.

Chapter 3 - The March to the Rear discusses the German retreat from the Don River to Kharkov. As the weather warms up the snow begins to melt very rapidly. Soon the icy frozen roads turn to thick rivers of mud. The German army is ordered to retreat from the Don, deemed untenable, to Kharkov and reestablish a main line of resistance. During the several days' drive Sajer rides with Ernst Neubach who drives a truck full of wounded soldiers. Neubach is a new friend who speaks good French; an engineer, Neubach is very resourceful and always seems to cobble things together to make life easier. For the time being, Hals and Lensen are assigned a different duty. During the many hours of driving Neubach and Sajer talks constantly about a variety of subjects. They proceed as far as Belgorod coming under occasional fire. Reportedly far behind enemy lines, they are confused about the constant Russian presence. Sajer continues in the truck full of wounded soldiers, passing many retreating soldiers who beg for a ride. After Sajer and Neubach become very close friends the truck column is strafed and Neubach is killed. Sajer, devastated, drives the truck with Neubach for about a half an hour until he dies from his wounds. Sajer continues driving the truck, often being towed through the mud by a tracked tank, until it runs out of gas. He then abandons the truck and the wounded—having nothing to offer them. Accompanied by a few walking wounded he proceeds through the cold mud until he reaches a village called Outcheni. There he is grouped with a ragtag assembly and participates in another firefight and comes under artillery fire. Eventually the unit reunites with some armored elements and retreats back to Kharkov where Sajer is reunited with his old unit. Overjoyed to see Olensheim, Sajer learns that Hals has received a minor neck wound and is recuperating. Later Hals rejoins the unit and in about March, 1943, the entire unit is canvassed by infantry recruiters. Hals, Lensen, and others step forward to volunteer. Although Sajer thinks they are crazy, he also volunteers to stay with his friends. Throughout the chapter the confusion of retreat is evident. The troops believe they are retreating behind the lines but in fact they are moving parallel to the lines. Thus after about one hundred miles they are not any safer than they were at the beginning. The abandonment of the truck is horrific and memorable, but Sajer has no alternative. Throughout all of Part One Sajer belongs to a unit he refers to as the 19th Rollbahn and is engaged in transportation duties. On p. 59 he talks to a soldier in an infantry company that relates taking about twenty percent casualties in three days of combat—this will become significant later as Sajer transfers to the infantry. Note that the supplies Sajer



accompanies to the front take several months to make the voyage from Germany to the front, illustrating the massive logistics problems faced by the armies of the eastern front during the war. Even so Sajer affirms that the Luftwaffe maintain air superiority whenever it is present and that in general the German armor is superior to the Russian armor (though the early German tanks are no match for T-34s). As an example, he notes 28,000 German soldiers with 56 tanks successfully fight 600,000 Russian soldiers with 1,100 tanks. At the end of Part One, the transport forces are urged to volunteer for the infantry. The recruiter does not have much luck until he promises a two-week pass for any volunteers, whereupon about half of the transport forces volunteer. Included within the volunteers are Hals, Lensen, and the author.



## Part 2 - The Gross Deutschland

### Part 2 - The Gross Deutschland Summary and Analysis

Part Two is divided into three chapters and is labeled as "Spring, 1493-Summer, 1943." Chapter 4 - Leave transpires almost entirely in Berlin. Having volunteered to enter the infantry in the Gross Deutschland Division (or Großdeutschland, an élite infantry regiment), the men are organized and have the division's famous insignia attached to their sleeves. The unit trains in the area of Akhtyrka. Finally the promised passes are issued and the men seek travel back to Germany, most traveling via Kharkov on trains. The journey is delayed several times by bombardment and the soldiers are enlisted to clear wreckage. Finally in mid-June Hals and Sajer reach Berlin and part ways. Sajer decides to visit Ernst Neubach's parents before continuing on to Alsace. He walks through Berlin, his first time there, and is surprised to see so much wreckage from bombardment. Before reaching the Neubach's, Sajer vacillates and abandons his plans, returning instead to await the next train. During one bombing episode Sajer attempts to enter a bomb shelter but is prevented because the entrance is blocked by an enormous unexploded bomb. Sajer takes a train as far as Madgeburg but there is stopped by a massive bombardment that destroys the tracks. Sajer initially is ignorant of which nation could be bombing Germany. After helping to clear rubble he is returned to Berlin for the remainder of his pass. He decides to call upon the Neubachs after all and in doing so meets a young woman named Paula. Paula is a neighbor of the Neubach family. Sajer receives a warm welcome from the Neubachs and Paula. Sajer spends the next week and a half courting Paula and touring Berlin with her. During their adventures they one day watch a massive aerial bombardment of Tempelhof from a distance. Sajer and Paula enjoy a budding romance with an unspecified degree of sexual intimacy. Throughout the remainder of the book Sajer thinks of Paula fondly and for several months they exchange letters. Sajer appears to send Paula about two letters per week for at least the next six months. She responds with at least several letters. They never see each other again, however. During this period of leave Sajer is visited by his father who brings along food, treats, and cigarettes. Sajer finds his father—a Frenchman—depressed and nervous and mostly wants him to depart so he can once again spend the time with Paula.

In Chapter 5 - Training for an Elite Division Sajer returns by train to the east. Aboard he meets up with Lensen and Hals. They pass through Korosten to near Romny and then are billeted at a place called Camp F. Training there is exhausting but provisions are good. New equipment is issued. The men are trained by Captain Fink, a naturally commanding man, who leads from the front. If Fink demands the men perform something, he performs it first. Although he is relentless the men respect him because he always does more than he demands from them. The training routine is formidable and a day's training often ends with many of the men collapsing from exhaustion. The training continues for about a month, through mid-July, during which time the conscripts





are treated harshly for any infringement of discipline. One man who refuses to train is publicly executed. Lensen is promoted to Sergeant. Sajer is flattered that finally he is accepted as a German among Germans. The training regimen receives much detail.

In Chapter 6 - Belgorod, Sajer and his unit are sent forward to Belgorod. At this time the front runs from Belgorod to Voronezh to Kursk in a giant triangle. About sixty thousand German soldiers participate in the Belgorod offensive, which is really a counterthrust following a retreat in the face of Russian superiority. Roughly eighteen thousand of the sixty thousand soldiers are Hitlerjugend, or Hitler Youth. This paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party is a junior counterpart to the Sturmabteilung, or SA. Most of the Hitlerjugend fighting around Belgorod would have been sixteen to eighteen years in age if not younger. They are a highly indoctrinated and fully equipped force. By the summer of 1943 virtually every German male child belongs to the Hitlerjugend though not all are fully militarized. Sajer is assigned to an assault group consisting of ten men. Hals is in Sajer's assault group as is a man identified in the book only as "the veteran." The Veteran is an experienced combat veteran who has a very sarcastic demeanor and a knack for staying alive. Kraus, Lindberg, Lensen, and Olensheim, other friends, are in different assault groups. Sajer's group is part of Company 5 K 8. Sajer is equipped with a Mauser rifle (presumably a Karabiner 98k) while Hals, larger and stronger, is issued an MG-42, which the book appears to also refer to as an "F.M. spandau", perhaps an artifact of translation. The unit is transported to the front and ordered into the line. Some of the soldiers, notably Lindberg, express much concern over the danger. During the early morning hours of darkness the unit crawls forward toward the enemy lines. No artillery bombardment will be used—instead, the advance assault units are supposed to take the enemy by surprise. One of the squad, Grumpers, encounters a Russian and a knife fight ensues wherein both men are killed. Minutes later general combat erupts along the line. Sajer feeds The Veteran's machine gun. Hals acquits himself well. Tanks pass close by and grind Russian soldiers to death under their treads. The assault proceeds and Sajer and his friends are stunned by the violence of combat—only The Veteran seems nonplussed. The sixty thousand Germans advance against about 400,000 to 500,000 Russians. Sajer's group takes two more casualties but continues to advance. Sajer sees that Olensheim has survived though he is wounded and has a broken arm. As the advance continues the Germans take no prisoners—all Russians are shot. As the assault continues the men realize "[s]omething hideous had entered our spirits, to remain and haunt us forever" (p. 189) and are stunned by the deaths of their comrades. Later, the Hitlerjugend advance taking massive losses. During this general period Kraus and one other man in Sajer's assault group are killed. Hals receives a minor head wound. Russian shelling begins and the Germans fight off an abortive Russian counterattack. Most of the soldiers enter a sort of transient madness and Lindberg is particularly affected. As the combat pauses in the night, Sajer's assault squad has only six of fourteen men left alive. Later another Russian counterattack drives the squad back from the field, killing an over-zealous German officer in the process. Sajer learns to follow the lead of The Veteran who has an uncanny knack for survival. Sajer, Hals, The Veteran, and others jump into a retreating halftrack but are thrown when it crashes into a giant shell hole. Sajer's shoulder is dislocated—he later receives adequate first aid. The entire operation lasts ten days during which the Germans suffer twenty thousand casualties, or about one third of their force. The lines

at the end of the operation are basically the same as they are at the beginning. Chapter 6 marks the final gasp of any German offensive. Chapter 6 also includes photographic reproductions in one common edition of the book.



## Part 3 - The Retreat

### Part 3 - The Retreat Summary and Analysis

Part Three is divided into three chapters and is labeled as "Autumn 1943." Chapter 7 - The New Front discusses the Russian recapture of Kharkov with several other major Russian breakthroughs. The Gross Deutschland regiment is fully equipped and supplied and is used as a reactionary force. While the entire German front collapses, the regiment is moved from one emergency to the next. Typically the soldiers understand little about their strategic situation or even location. Sajer's unit is led by Hauptmann (Captain) Wesreidau. Wesreidau is a devoted soldier, fully loyal to Germany, and highly indoctrinated with Nazi policy. He is a formidable soldier and appears immune to fear. The pragmatic soldiers approve him fully, especially The Veteran. Wesreidau often delivers lengthy speeches on policy and philosophy; also, his tactics are sound. Lindberg and Hals recover from their wounds and return to duty. Lensen, too, has survived. Sajer has remained on active duty throughout. For a few weeks the regiment remains in one place and during this time Hals meets a Russian girl, apparently a prostitute, and falls in love with her. The company priest also calls on her. The regiment eventually falls back to Konotop. Despite Hals' attempts the Russian girl is left behind to an uncertain fate. During one operation the regiment enters a village only to discover it has not been evacuated of civilians. Many civilians are killed in the crossfire between German and Russian troops. The town is finally secured with great losses. Sajer continues to be stunned by the violence and horror of combat.

Chapter 8 - The Breakthrough at Konotop is a brief chapter. The regiment advances in the area around Konotop in an attempt to exploit their recent victory. They soon realize, however, that they are completely encircled. A general breakout is ordered. All equipment is to be retained and the men are to break out to the west. The German main line will also thrust to the east in an attempt to link up. During this period Sajer has a fever—probably malaria induced—of 104°. He is nevertheless deemed fit for duty during the breakout. The situation is so critical that the wounded are simply abandoned. When some men try to help a wounded comrade they are ordered to leave him. The regiment fights west under constant artillery fire and succeeds finally in linking up with other German forces. Sajer, befuddled by fever, finds the experience largely disorientating and recalls mostly being ordered to run for prolonged periods of time. Sajer comments that the disasters enveloping even a well supplied and élite unit such as the Gross Deutschland foreshadowed the end of the Reich.

Chapter 9 discusses a relatively short but intense period of time. The German army has tens of thousands of men on the east bank of the Dnieper but has formally evacuated to the west bank. The bulk of the army south of Kiev arrives at a single location where bridges do not exist and the army begins a tortuous process of ferrying men across on small rafts. Many soldiers take to anything that can putatively float or even attempt to swim. The evacuation takes several days during which time the Russian advance continues and pressure builds on the retreating pocket. Fortunately for Sajer's unit the



main Russian thrust is directed at Kiev, to the north. Sajer waits for several days. One night a transient Russian tank advance causes a general rout amongst the demoralized Germans and many flee into the river and stand semi-submerged for hours in the cold water. Another day sees ten Russian tanks drive the length of the pocket with seeming immunity, killing Germans as they move. They do not stop but proceed northward, presumably to Kiev. The German medical service is so inundated that many German soldiers perform mercy killings of severely injured comrades. Wesreidau eventually reorganizes most of his command and secures crossing privileges. Sajer finally makes the fifteen minute crossing on a severely overloaded raft.



## Part 4 - To The West

### Part 4 - To The West Summary and Analysis

Part Four is divided into six chapters and is labeled as "Winter, 1943-Summer, 1944." Chapter 10 - "Gott Mit Uns" finds Sajer evacuated to the western bank of the Dnieper River. He and the other soldiers anticipate a well-organized German camp where they will be refitted and allowed to clean and rest. Instead they are left in the open for many hours and then interrogated by military police that seem to view them as cowards if not outright traitors. Sajer's paperwork is in order but the fact that he has a few unfired cartridges in his pocket suggests to the military police interrogator that he fled in cowardly retreat. Sajer is not disciplined though others are stripped of rank or assigned to penal battalions. As this interrogation is transpiring the Russians finally collapse the last pocket on the west shore capturing 2,500 soldiers and killing about 7,500 more. Later the men are reorganized to return to their units. The men, filthy from combat, are treated poorly. Sajer is eventually packed into a truck with other soldiers for transportation. Seriously ill with fever, the long truck ride twists his insides into knots and unable to exit the truck he is forced to vacate his bowels where he stands. The bloody diarrhea recurs several times during the trip. The truck arrives at a sorting center and Sajer is sent to medical services where he is diagnosed with chronic Dysenteric diarrhea. He is kept in a makeshift infirmary for a few days and receives several enemas. Later, he finally rejoins his unit and discovers Olensheim, Hals, Lensen, Lindberg, and The Veteran are all well. His unit is again placed under the command of Weisreidau. Sajer spends the next week more or less delirious, though he does receive mail—much of it from Paula. The unit is then transported to near Vinnitsa and Sajer is again hospitalized for three weeks. He is then issued a ten day pass for leave. Sajer gets to a train station and is appalled to see and speak with a grizzled veteran who runs the station and does not spout German propaganda. The contrast of the stationmaster's pragmatism and Sajer's idealism (reference pp. 190-192) is compelling. Sajer waits about nine hours and finally catches a westbound train, hoping to visit Berlin and maybe even France.

Chapter 11 - Cancelled Leave discusses Sajer's abortive train trip. He travels from Vinnitsa to Lublin with other soldiers on leave. They are then disembarked and told that because of Germany's imperiled state all leave has been canceled. They re-board the train and are sent back east. Soon the train brakes and the soldiers are ordered out. Russian or Polish partisans have destroyed the track and wrecked another train. Sajer and others are enlisted into scratch units to pursue the partisans and several brief firefights ensue. Sajer's unit of eight men is ordered into a dark factory building and they are ambushed—six of the men are killed. Sajer hides in a dark corner and shoots a partisan as he approaches. Sajer reports being nearly paralyzed with fear. Several minutes later a German armored vehicle drives through the wall and kills the remaining partisans. Several partisans surrender and are executed. Sajer continues his journey and reaches Vinnitsa only to learn his unit has been moved some three hundred miles away to the front. Sajer begins a long voyage through the brutal Polish winter. The early



portions of the trip are made by truck and then by foot. Sajer ends up in a unit of about a dozen men who have mixed but similar destinations. They walk on foot across the steppe and become lost. They learn the front is very fluid and their units' positions are somewhat unclear. Sajer frets about the breakdown of typical German efficiency. He and one other soldier catch a short ride inside a Tiger tank. After a few days of travel Sajer finds his unit and discovers Wesreidau still in command. Sajer rejoins The Veteran, Hals, Lensen, and Lindberg as part of a squad. The Veteran and Wesreidau enjoy an easy-going camaraderie and they discuss the ultimate fate of the Russian advance from the Don to the Donets to the Dnieper. Wesreidau argues the Russians could never cross the Pripet, The Veteran suggests they will eventually cross the Oder. Sajer mentions in the book that Wesreidau is killed before the Russians reach the Oder River.

In Chapter 12 - Red Tanks, Sajer spends ten days with his unit and often listens to The Veteran and Wesreidau talk. Wesreidau tells his soldiers that Germany is losing the war. Sajer's unit believes this as their position is constantly infiltrated by plundering German soldiers who are retreating from elsewhere on the front. In this area his division holds sixty miles (perhaps five would be typical of normal defense during this period) of front and is outnumbered by about thirty to one. Further, the division is fully deployed with no reserves and is operating at only about two thirds of its regular strength. During this period Sajer receives letters from home and learns that Paula has been evacuated from Berlin and is working in a factory some forty miles from the city. Sajer's position defends against Russian tanks with a combination of anti-tank ditches, anti-tank grenades, magnetic mines, Panzerfausts, and a single Pak gun (probably a 37mm). Olensheim is attached to the gun. During one brief encounter, Sajer's poorly-equipped unit knocks out three Russian tanks. Less experienced soldiers believe it a great victory but Sajer recognizes the Russian advance was simply a probe. Later, Russian shelling kills many soldiers during a four-day period. During this time Olensheim, recovered from a serious wound at Belgorod, is killed. The Veteran is also seriously wounded and is evacuated to the rear. When the Russian attack begins in earnest it is successful and the German lines are completely overrun. Sajer is buried alive by a collapsing dugout during an artillery barrage and it takes about twenty minutes to become extricated. As he flees the front he picks up an abandoned rifle and later realizes it is a Russian weapon. His unit suffers about 25% casualties in the rout. Lensen, Hals, and Lindberg fight alongside Sajer; he notes that Lensen is particularly brave while Lindberg is perpetually cowering. In fact, Lensen has destroyed at least seven tanks and has been awarded the Iron Cross. However, one night of relaxation (pp. 322-323) ends with a drunken Lensen accusing Sajer of being a mixed-race coward, genetically damaged by his French heritage. Sajer realizes sadly that he is not really a German amongst Germans. Lindberg, hailing from near Lake Constance, is also really not accepted as a German. Here the racial indoctrination of Nazi politics becomes quite evident even among a tight-knit group of veterans. The fleeing survivors reunite; Hals, Lensen, Lindberg, and Sajer are once again led by Wesreidau as the German army retreats from the so-called second Dnieper front.

In Chapter 13 - The Third Retreat Sajer's unit marches west for thirty miles. They find the distance entirely vacated of German soldiers though Russian and Polish partisans



are frequently encountered. Sajer is eventually left with other soldiers as a blockading force—they are to attempt to slow down the Russian advance. The temperature drops to forty degrees below zero and most men suffer some type of frostbite while vehicle engines will not start. The unit then moves on discovering various mutilated German corpses. In one town that is presumed empty, German soldiers inadvertently walk into booby traps and mines. At this time several partisans are noted as being armed with American guns. Any partisans who are captured are summarily executed. Eventually Sajer's unit and others coalesce around a town called Boporoeivska (probably Borowiska). The units consist of numerous random German soldiers because of the massive confusion of retreat. A miserable Christmas, 1943, passes. A few days later Sajer's unit knocks out three "Stalin" tanks (probably IS-1). Later, the Germans mine their front and the Russians preserve their armored vehicles by sending a massive human wave of Mongols across the minefield. The temperature drops to forty-five degrees below zero. For three weeks the soldiers try to keep from freezing and Russian propaganda is delivered over loudspeakers. In February, 1944, a Russian attack involving T-34 and Sherman tanks is driven off. Over the next few days a massive Russian attack along a huge front is launched but, against all odds, the German and Rumanian lines hold. Many believe that the tide of retreat has finally turned.

In Chapter 14 - Return to Poland, Sajer's unit is transported to a training camp some fifty miles from Lvov. There, after eighteen months of combat, they are treated as green recruits. Their units receive replacements drawn from schoolboys and the domestic police forces. They are issued new uniforms and new boots, and they are mystified at the appearance of nylon, a then-new synthetic material. Their banal training is interspersed with frequent liberties. The barracks life is easy but the formal food issue is only a starvation diet. Hals falls in love with a Polish girl and Sajer spends much of his free time foraging for food. During one foraging trip he is ravished by a "fat Polish mama" (p. 358) who he fends off at the last possible moment—he is uncharacteristically picky for a teenage soldier on leave. As spring arrives the unit is dispatched once again to Vinnitsa and the front. On the way they are strafed and bombed by a strong detachment of Russian aircraft, taking heavy casualties.

In Chapter 15 - Return to the Ukraine finds Sajer's company deployed behind the lines with presumed mobility to patrol and suppress partisan activities. One intense firefight involves about nine hundred Germans assaulting about four hundred partisans in a prepared defense. The attack is bloody and leads to hand-to-hand combat; Sajer kills one partisan with the butt of his rifle. The partisans lose about two hundred men, the Germans seventy. On another occasion a portion of the unit is called to relieve a besieged outpost some one hundred miles distant. After four hours they arrive and encounter what appears to be a partisan group. A brief combat ensues in which the partisans are discovered to be mixed men, boys, and girls—in fact, most of the populace of the local village. They are all killed and the village is raided for food. Sajer and the other soldiers are surprised by the intense hatred of the surviving villagers. On the return trip Wesreidau's automobile hits a mine, mortally wounding him. He is revived briefly and makes a formal statement of the necessity and desirability of German unity, and then calmly dies. The next day the unit, now led by Lieutenant Wollers, again is sent to the front. They are without vehicles and must march. For a few weeks they





march across the apparently endless steppes, forced to forage for all supplies. The Germans inflict a scorched earth policy so that nothing useful is left behind for the enemy. One day they drop leaflets from Russian planes, urging them to surrender because the war is lost. On another day they encounter ten or twelve thousand German soldiers fleeing the front in a body—as they continue toward the front they are heckled by the retreating soldiers. Suicides become common as starvation begins. Villages are raided and the population massacred to facilitate foraging. Fratricide is common among the starving soldiers competing for food. Eventually the unit dissolves and the remaining men begin a retreat to and through Rumania. Occasional firefights with partisans occur. One day Sajer and a few friends find an overturned supply truck and stuff their pockets—two of the men are arrested by police and hanged as traitors to Germany. Sajer, Hals, Lensen, and Lindberg manage to stay together. They retreat alongside Lieutenant Wollers, their company's commanding officer, and Sergeant Sperlovski, apparently the company's senior noncommissioned officer.





## Part 5 - The End and Epilogue

### Part 5 - The End and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Part Four is divided into four chapters and is labeled as "Autumn, 1944-Spring, 1945." During Chapter 16 - From Poland to East Prussia all German military forces have been driven from Russia. Sajer, Lensen, Hals, and others are under the command of Wollers and are transported to Lodz where they are resupplied. Sajer notes that many replacements were men from sixty to sixty-five years of age or children from thirteen to sixteen years of age; he wonders how these troops will be useful in combat. The Veteran then rejoins the group near a town called Medau where the division is regrouping. He recounts his story of recuperation and notes that German cities have been bombed into rubble. His ear is missing. The Veteran expounds on the German theory of total war. The unit then moves toward the front and on one occasion Lensen rants about the other soldier's unwillingness to sacrifice for the cause. The Veteran agrees and expounds on the German cause and the need for dedication. Meanwhile mail arrives and Sajer is promoted to obergefreiter (roughly, corporal). During this period the first Russian troops cross the German frontier; Germany has become the invaded country. Sajer's unit of about three hundred men prepares a defensive position against an assault of about three thousand Russians. Then when about eighty Russian tanks arrive they depart, leaving three blocking squads with Panzerfausts. Sajer leads one of the groups and he is sure he will soon die. The first group engages several tanks and knocks out two tanks before they are killed. The second group is led by Lensen who also knocks out two tanks before he and his men are ground to death under the treads of a tank. As the tanks approach Sajer's position he asks his companion to shoot him—the companion refuses. Sajer collapses mentally and cannot issue any order or take any action. His men cower around him. At the last possible moment Sajer is saved by the intervention of a powerful German tank force counterattacking the advancing Russians. Sajer comes to view his inaction as his life's primary moment of failure.

Chapter 17 - Memel discusses the final German defense of Memel, a Prussian city at the time of the book. Sajer's unit diverts to Memel because it is the only German strongpoint that they can realistically reach. Shortly after their arrival the city is entirely cut off from German forces, leaving a pocket about fifteen miles across. The German defense is unsupplied and insufficiently armed with heavy weapons. No air support is available and armor support is limited to a very few broken down and obsolescent tanks. The infantry forces available are a mixture of emaciated and battle fatigued veterans, sixty-year-old recruits, and sixteen-year-old recruits. Sajer reports that women often fight in the lines. The defenses are a series of shallow anti-tank ditches and widely spaced pillboxes. From time to time the Germans are supported by naval gunfire from ships in the harbor. The Russian forces attacking the pocket are well-equipped, numerically vastly superior, fully armored, and heavily supported by air. The only thing that prevents a near-instant collapse is that Russian attention is diverted from the city by events elsewhere. The defenders engage in daily firefights from mid-December until total collapse in late January. The time Sajer spends in Memel represents the worst and



most-desperate period of fighting discussed in the book. The German defenders are entirely surrounded and pushed back against the sea. Supplies and food are virtually non-existent, medical treatment and rest facilities are not available, and heavy Russian forces continually compress the German defenses around the city. Evacuations by sea are haphazard and often prevented by persistent and strong Russian air power; in any case about one million refugee civilians take precedence in the sea evacuations. Sajer notes that even British and Canadian prisoners of war prefer evacuation to being captured by the Russians. Throughout the entire period the weather grows colder as winter falls. As the pocket continually collapses the civilians eventually disappear altogether. Sajer becomes seriously ill and routinely coughs up blood. As organization completely breaks down Sajer, The Veteran, Lindberg, Pferham the parson, and Wollers keep together. Most of them at one time or another attempt suicide or contemplate suicide. While nearly all of them mentally collapse The Veteran remains alert and often saves them from ambushes or traps. One day the unit makes a small advance and then retreats, pursued by Russian tanks. Fearing they are all going to die, they huddle in a ditch. The Veteran then announces that he will cover the retreat and orders the others to flee. Without much time they do run away while The Veteran fires his machine gun for cover. He is presumed killed minutes later by the Russian advance and does not appear again in the narrative. Later, Sajer and others attempt to make a raft to flee via the sea but their flimsy construction sinks. Finally Wollers simply walks away from Memel and the others follow him. They walk down the beach to a point a few thousand yards from the Russians and spend a few days hiding in a dugout. Combat continues elsewhere and they come under occasional sniper fire. The few men cease to think, slowly starve, and scarcely know they are alive. One night they hear a distant boat moving along the shoreline. Calling out to it they rush into the water and are dragged aboard. This random boat passing saves Sajer, Hals, and a few others. The boat transports them to the town of Pillau where they discover a massive refugee camp and chaos.

Chapter 18 - Calvary begins in Pillau where Sajer remains for about three weeks. His entire unit is declared unfit for combat, indicating their exceptionally unhealthy state after Memel. Freed from combat, they are nevertheless used as labor helping civilians evacuate and preparing defensive positions. During this time Wollers loses two fingers from wounds. Pferham the pastor, Lindberg, Grandsk the cook, and Hals are Sajer's typical companions. The unit is then ordered to Kahlberg but transportation is not available so they proceed on foot. They then are sent on to Danzig where they are pleased to find relative calm and good organization. There is no combat in the vicinity and they spend a few days taking a break and recuperating. One night they are sheltered and fed by a civilian family. When the Russians approach Danzig and aerial bombardment begins, the unit proceeds to Gotenhafen. Throughout the entire period orders are sketchy or impromptu and the unit does not have a clear idea of its military purpose. The ragtag bunch is folded into a scratch battalion and receives large amounts of food—in preparation of evacuation the local civilians are slaughtering cattle rather than leaving them behind. With a good diet the men's health and strength recovers quickly. It is the end of February. The unit is sent to Zappot where they are engaged in some skirmishes while offering defense against Russian advances. During one serious engagement Sajer personally fires a panzerfaust at an advancing tank and knocks it out. The Russians are repulsed though the men know it is only temporary. Pferham is



seriously wounded and vanishes from the narrative. The unit then returns to Gotenhafen which, over the next few weeks, becomes much like the last days of Memel, save only on a smaller scale. Sajer watches a child born during one night in an air raid shelter, surrounded by seriously wounded and dying people. One day Sajer, Wollers, Hals, Lindberg and Grandsk are aboard a ship helping civilians board. As an air raid begins, the ship captain casts off the lines and heads to sea. Wollers, realizing that the men have inadvertently evacuated, makes sure they all have their evacuation cards. They depart Germany.

In Chapter 19 - The West the boat arrives at Hela. The men disembark and learn they are to be transferred at the end of March. Confused about the date they eventually conclude it to be either the 28th or 29th of March. On April 1 they board a passenger liner and travel to Denmark where they exchange ships and travel to Kiel. They then are put into a scratch unit and travel west, learning that most of western Germany is currently in British or Canadian hands—the news stuns the men as they have always believed, and been told, that the west has been at peace. Sajer in particular is shocked to learn that France has taken up arms against Germany; he cannot seem to comprehend that his two beloved nations are at war. The unit eventually ends up near Lauenburg where they shoot three British soldiers before surrendering. Expecting the worse, they are bewildered when they are merely fed and put into fenced yards. Over the next days they are questioned and documented; Sajer tells his questioner that he has not received any mail from home in over one year. Sajer presents a special case because his father is French and his mother is German. The British interrogators hand him over to the French interrogators and the French decide that he cannot be considered a traitor nor yet a prisoner of war and they decide that he is liberated—released, he can go home. He does not see Hals or his other friends again. On the advice of a French interrogator Sajer signs up for a tour with the French army, "to clear yourself" (p. 459); e.g., of the stain of fighting for Germany. While awaiting his call up Sajer returns home. His mother walks past him on the street twice without recognizing him; his family has long presumed he is dead and is stunned by his appearance. Sajer never hears from Paula again. He serves ten months of his three year enlistment in the French army and is then discharged because of serious illness. During his enlistment he is shunned as a traitor and a freak.



# Characters

## Guy Sajer

Guy Sajer, the author of the autobiography, is the principle actor in the narrative. He does not provide a comprehensive biography but significant details can be gleaned from the narrative. He comes from an apparently middle class family. His father is French and his mother is German. He has brothers and sisters though their ages are not given. Sajer's father is a quiet and retiring man who is somewhat anti-German in feeling. Sajer grows up speaking French and just before the outbreak of World War II is living with his family in Wissembourg in Alsace. He is born in Paris, France; he reports his age as 17 years 9 months during the winter of 1943, indicating a birth of early 1926. Some published biographies give his birth date as 13 January, 1927. He states his weight at 130 pounds. "Sajer" is the author's mother's maiden name; his birth surname is Mouminoux. After the German invasion and occupation of Alsace and other regions of France, Sajer apparently faces conscription into the infantry and instead volunteers for air force service. However, he fails to pass the air force entrance examinations and after a few weeks of training is transferred to a transportation unit specializing in resupply of front line units. Sajer's unit includes several men who appear throughout the narrative, including Hals, Lensen, and Lindberg. Sajer is particularly drawn to Hals and a few others who speak French because his German language abilities are poor. Sajer's unit does supply the front for several weeks. Then an infantry recruiter visits the unit and asks for volunteers for infantry service. Sajer does not plan to volunteer but when Hals and others do volunteer, Sajer follows them so they will not be separated. The volunteers are given a two-week pass and Sajer attempts to visit his family in France. He is prevented from reaching France by massive Allied bombardments and instead spends his two weeks leave in Berlin. There he calls upon the family of Ernst Neubach. The Neubachs' neighbors include a teenager girl named Paula with whom Sajer pursues an intense two week romantic relationship. Sajer then returns to his unit and undergoes a brief but difficult infantry training regimen.

Sajer's unit is then sent to the eastern front where it participates in a series of defensive battles and a series of retreats. By this time, Germany is losing the war and the Russian advance appears unstoppable. His unit goes through various organizations and deployments as it continually falls back to the west. Numerous casualties occur in Sajer's unit including several of his closest associates. Sajer and Hals both receive occasional minor wounds—none of Sajer's are directly combat related—and Sajer suffers several bouts of serious illness. Eventually, Sajer and some remnants of his unit end up in Memel where they undergo a prolonged series of defensive battles before evacuating by ship to Kiel. There they are organized into a scratch unit and shipped west to face the approaching British and Canadian armies. Most of the German soldiers by this point—many very old men—are eager to surrender. After a single encounter with the British, Sajer and others surrender. They are treated fairly well. Sajer's particular case causes confusion because he is at first deemed a traitor to France but then is



simply allowed to walk away as a liberated French citizen. He joins the French army to rehabilitate his legal standing but is discharged after ten months due to illness.

## Hals

Hals is Sajer's closest friend in the narrative. Because of this, Hals appears more than any other individual save Sajer. Sajer provides very little biographical data about Hals but as he is slightly older than Sajer, Hals' birth date may be assumed to be circa 1925. Sajer repeatedly states that Hals is physically large and strong but, given Sajer's weight of 130 pounds, Hals may not have been overly large by today's standards. Sajer describes Hals as a "teddy bear" but also notes that he occasionally lapses into violent rages, usually about insufficient food. For the most part, Hals is cheerful and happy and essentially optimistic. Hals is always eating, is always hungry, and will eat just about anything he can swallow. Much of Hals' free time is spent scrounging for food. Despite his omnivorous diet Hals apparently never gets sick and spends the entire war in good health, thanks to an apparent iron constitution. Hals is lightly wounded several times including once in the neck for which he is sent to the rear for several weeks of recovery. Hals apparently heals rapidly and well. He usually falls in love with a local girl whenever the unit spends more than a few weeks in a given locale close to civilians. On one occasion he falls desperately in love with a Russian whore and unsuccessfully tries to figure out some way of taking her along when his unit departs. She is forgotten a few weeks later. Hals accompanies Sajer through all the major events of the book including Memel and surrender on the western front. Hals demonstrates consistent bravery under fire and often operates a machine gun. Hals, a German, remains in the prisoner of war camp after Sajer is discharged. Hals and Sajer apparently never reunite after the war.

## Bruno Lensen

Bruno Lensen is one of the most commonly mentioned soldiers in the book and is also one of the first soldiers mentioned in the book. He is almost always within the same small unit as Sajer. Lensen is a Prussian and is quite proud of his heritage. He begins his military career in a transportation unit with Sajer and then volunteers for the infantry at the same time as Sajer, Hals, and others. Lensen also goes on leave at the same time as most of the other named soldiers in the book. Lensen ends up in the same infantry company as Sajer and the two become familiar companions. Lensen and Sajer never share the same close companionship that Sajer has with other soldiers. Throughout combat Lensen proves exceptionally brave and is widely admired for his combat prowess. He personally destroys at least nine Russian tanks and is awarded the Iron Cross. He is promoted first to corporal and eventually to sergeant and during the company's final deployments in Poland appears to have a significant voice in company tactical decisions. Lensen frequently is in charge of a Pak gun and very frequently leads a Panzerfaust team. Lensen is deeply indoctrinated with Nazi philosophy and considers Sajer as a nearly hopeless case because of his French heritage. Lensen has a similar disregard for Lindberg. Lensen considers himself to be a pure German and believes this explains why he is so dependable in combat. During the book Lensen delivers several



rants about German determination and total war and sacrifice. Lensen is killed in Poland while his unit is moving toward Memel. He leads a squad that assaults a string of Russian tanks with nothing but a handful of Panzerfausts. After he destroys two of the Russian tanks, Lensen is ground to pieces under the treads of another Russian tank that overruns his position and kills his entire squad. Sajer is an eye-witness to Lensen's horrible end.

## The Veteran, August Wiener

August Wiener is referred to simply as "the veteran" throughout most of the book; apparently the men in his squad also refer to him in this way. The Veteran first meets Sajer on the Belgorod front where they are assigned to the same assault unit. By this time The Veteran has extensive combat experience. Sajer initially finds The Veteran's sarcastic pragmatism appalling and believes unit morale will suffer from it. Within a few hours Sajer comes to trust The Veteran's nearly infallible sense of self preservation during combat. Over the next several months The Veteran and Sajer are in the same squad. These two men survive as numerous others, many named but most unnamed, are killed. The Veteran is noted as older and was probably born circa 1915. He speaks Russian and is often armed with an MG 42 with which he is particularly effective. He enjoys a close and easy camaraderie with Hauptmann Wesreidau—their casual banter often shocks Sajer and other soldiers because of the frank nature in which they discuss the war. The Veteran is lightly wounded at Belgorod but rapidly recovers. Later, he is seriously wounded during the Russian overrun of the so-called second Dnieper front. He is evacuated and disappears from the narrative for several months, reappearing in a Medau as the division reassembles (p. 396). The Veteran, in the book usually hereafter referred to as Wiener, has recovered from serious wounds and is disfigured by the loss of an ear. He reports that Frankfurt-am-Oder has been bombed to rubble and presumes that most other German cities are in a similar state. The Veteran is much changed, mentally, by his ordeal and Sajer finds him taciturn and committed to a total defense of Germany. For the next month or so The Veteran fights with an intensity and dedication that makes other soldiers admire him. During the final days of Memel The Veteran sacrifices himself by holding a machine gun position while his comrades, including Sajer, retreat. The Veteran's heroic sacrifice saves several comrades but is lost in the mass destruction of Memel.

## Lindberg

Lindberg is one of the first soldiers mentioned in the book and becomes one of Sajer's close friends and a constant companion. When a Gross Deutschland recruiter asks for volunteers from Lindberg's transportation unit, Lindberg volunteers with others to join the infantry. He subsequently is trained along with Sajer, goes on leave at the same time, and then is deployed in the same unit under Hauptmann Wesreidau. Lindberg is usually in the same immediate vicinity as Sajer, and he remains with Sajer and Hals throughout the entire war. Sajer frequently states that Lindberg is not particularly brave and spends much pre-combat time in a state of heightened nervousness, often nearly a





form of madness. During shelling in particular Lindberg appears to collapse mentally. Sajer also notes that during several combats Lindberg cowers under cover. After combat, Lindberg occasionally joins in exultant bragging with the survivors though he never attributes any great bravery to himself, personally. Unsurprisingly, Lindberg is not wounded during the war and survives to surrender to British forces on the western front.

## Olensheim

Olensheim is one of the first soldiers mentioned in the book and quickly becomes one of Sajer's closest friends. Olensheim speaks French, like Lensen and Hals, and along with Sajer the four soldiers remain together throughout most of the war. Olensheim appears to be particularly friendly with Sajer. When a Gross Deutschland recruiter asks for volunteers from Olensheim's transportation unit, Olensheim volunteers with others to join the infantry. He subsequently is trained along with Sajer, goes on leave at the same time, and then is deployed in the same unit under Hauptmann Wesreidau. Olensheim is usually in the same immediate vicinity as Sajer through Olensheim frequently is detailed to a squad manning an anti-tank gun. Olensheim is seriously wounded at Belgorod, but fully recovers and rejoins the same unit. He serves as a typical soldier and is brave and does not suffer from nerves or depression, but apparently is not particularly distinguished in combat. Olensheim is killed (p. 325) during the Russian overrun of the so-called second Dnieper front; he is the first of the original close-knit group of friends to be killed.

## Hauptmann Wesreidau

Herr Hauptmann (Captain) Wesreidau is the company commander under whom Sajer serves from the fall of 1943 (possibly before) until Wesreidau's death in the spring of 1944. Wesreidau is portrayed as the consummate German officer—always in complete control of his emotional and mental state, wholly devoted to the German cause, fully competent in military tactics and leadership, and utterly fearless. The men are devoted to him, particularly The Veteran. Sajer clearly idolizes Wesreidau. In most combat situations Wesreidau is near or at the front and routinely suffers alongside his men. In several instances he intervenes to secure, or at least to attempt to secure, preferential treatment for his men. He never complains and never doubts that Germany will ultimately be victorious. On multiple occasions Wesreidau addresses the troops with a blend of propaganda, paternal advice, and strategic information. Throughout his command his unit suffers constant and catastrophic losses, yet Wesreidau manages to maintain unit cohesion and a sense of élite status. Wesreidau's successes insure he is often given difficult situations to handle. Sajer states that Wesreidau has children but no particular biographical details are provided for him, other than he is tall, thin, and commanding. He speaks Russian. Wesreidau is not adverse to tackling the complexities of warfare and during one tense standoff between mixed villagers and his forces he tells the villagers that if they do not back down he will have his men open fire; on another occasion he threatens group reprisals; on numerous occasions he orders—or permits—the execution of prisoners whose presence has become a nuisance. Wesreidau is killed



when the car in which he is driving strikes a mine. He revives for a short period and tells his men that they must seek German unity and pursue the cause, before dying peacefully. Note that Hauptmann Wesreidau has never been located on the historical records of the German armed forces. Wesreidau is replaced by Lieutenant Wollers. Sajer watches Wesreidau die.

## **Feldwebel (Sergeant) Laus**

Laus is the feldwebel of the group that Sajer serves in during his duty in the 19th Rollbahn. Laus' exact station is not clarified except that he gives Sajer direct orders. Laus appears early in the book and recurs with consistent frequency until Sajer volunteers for the infantry—Laus remains behind with the transportation and supply group. Laus is a conscientious noncom and usually strives to keep his men in line and performing their duty. He is liked by the men even though they sometimes gripe about his relentless dedication. Like nearly all the soldiers briefly mentioned in the book, Laus' ultimate fate is not disclosed.

## **Ernst Neubach**

Ernst Neubach is a driver who strikes up a friendship with Sajer during a supply mission. During the period of Neubach's friendship with Sajer, Sajer's other regular companions are on another duty. Like Sajer, Neubach speaks good French and the two men share many interests. Within days they have developed a close friendship. While Neubach drives, Sajer provides nominal security. Neubach is from Berlin and is married; both his parents are alive. Little other biographical detail is provided. One day the transportation column in which Neubach is driving is strafed by aircraft. Sajer jumps from the truck and escapes injury but Neubach is too slow. He receives aircraft fire through the lower jaw and face. The mortal injury leaves Neubach unable to speak and scarcely able to breathe. Sajer reenters the truck and takes over driving duties while Neubach quietly dies in the passenger seat over the next half hour, clutching Sajer's arm in a death grip. Sajer buries Neubach's body and, later, visits Neubach's parents in Berlin. Sajer spends most of his two weeks' leave visiting the Neubach family and their neighbor, Paula.

## **Paula**

Paula is a German woman of about nineteen years age who lives near the parents of Ernst Neubach. Sajer meets Paula while he is in Berlin in leave. At first she treats him circumspectly because he does not speak good German and appears to be emotionally confused. At the urging of Ernest Neubach's parents, Paula spends a few days showing Sajer around Berlin which he has never visited before. Within a short period of time Sajer develops feelings for Paula. Knowing he is on a brief leave he tries to rush the relationship only to damage it. However, Paula comes to the same realization and they begin some type of physical and sexual relationship though the extent is not specified.





During one memorable day Paula and Sajer sit in the countryside and watch a terrific bombing of the Tempelhof district and airport. When Sajer departs again for the front Paula gives him a care package including a photograph. She then exchanges letters with him for many months. However, Paula and Sajer never see each other again. Sajer learns in a letter that during late 1943 Paula is evacuated from Berlin and works in a factory some forty miles from the city. Sajer's romantic interlude with Paula forms an eerily strange backdrop for his participation in combat.

## Leutnant Wollers

Leutnant (Lieutenant) Wollers appears late in the narrative as he takes over command of the company in which Sajer serves following the death of Hauptmann Wesreidau. No biographical data is offered for Wollers. He appears to have been within the company prior to his taking command as all the men know him. His command is marked by constant combat, insufficient supply, and often contradictory orders. Wollers appears to enjoy the confidence of the men and be an able leader. He prosecutes the war effort with dedication but when he realizes all is lost he tends to try to preserve his men when possible. He makes no overt effort to regain the combat zone and instead prefers to let his men evacuate Memel during the last days of fighting. He surrenders to British forces in the west with the remainder of his men.



## Objects/Places

### Ost Front und Panzer Wolfram

Ost Front und Panzer Wolfram is a propaganda magazine that is produced by the German military and circulated among the soldiers of the eastern front. During the early stages of Sajer's military career he has access to the publication (e.g., p. 84, p. 287, etc.) and the soldiers tend to believe that what it reports generally is true. However, the paper's falsehoods create problems for the soldiers as they assume they are safe in areas that the Russians have recaptured; they also assume that the war is going well for Germany everywhere except for in their immediate sector. In the winter of 1943 the magazine begins to report that France has joined with Germany as an ally.

### Popovs, Muzhiks, and Ivans

Popov is the German pejorative for a Russian soldier; they are often referred to as Ivan, Ivans, or Muzhiks. Muzhik usually is translated as peasant or serf and generally infers poverty. Sajer characterizes the Russian soldier as usually dressed in brown, almost always heavily bearded, and poorly supplied with clothing and food. They die in huge numbers from freezing, starving, and of course German firepower. Even so, Sajer admits the typical Russian soldier is brave and fairly competent.

### Ourrah, pobieda! and Sieg Heil!

"Ourrah, pobieda!" is the Russian battle cry used throughout most of the fighting. It is variously translated as "Hurray for the Motherland!" or simply "Hurrah, Victory!" Sajer reports that hearing massed Russians chanting the battle cry causes hardened German soldiers to fear for their lives. The analogous German battle cry is usually "Sieg Heil!" which is usually translated as "Hail Victory!" The German chant gains popularity at political rallies in Nazi Germany and carries over into the armed forces.

### Small Arms

The book mentions numerous small arms used by the German infantry. Chief among these is the Mauser, or Karabiner 98k, the standard German battle rifle of World War II. The rifle is a bolt-action magazine rifle. Another commonly-mentioned weapon is the MG 42, an excellent machine gun that is often considered the best machine gun of the war. Sajer mentions other types of automatic rifles, submachine guns, various types of grenades, and squad-level mortars. He usually refers to them only vaguely and often the details are somewhat confusing. It is unclear whether Sajer does not care about the technical aspects of the weapons, remembers them incorrectly, or if some of the details do not survive translation. Sajer's frequent reference to an "F.M." machine gun may be a French-to-English translational artifact of "fusil mitrailleur", analogous to the English



"M.G." Sajer's references to a "P.M." are presumably a reference to some type of easily portable automatic rifle. Sajer notes that some Russians are equipped with American rifles as early as December, 1943.

## Artillery

Sajer discusses artillery in the book at considerable length though he focuses more on the mental effects of being under artillery bombardment than on the types of artillery used. He often refers to German guns as a "77" and it is unclear what type of artillery this signifies—perhaps a reference to the Pak 40 (a 75mm gun) or similar, or perhaps a mistaken reference to the ubiquitous German 88mm family of guns. In any event, numerous passages of the book describe the horrific effects of artillery bombardment and describe the incredible mental strain endured by those being shelled. Sajer notes the particularly devastating impact of the Russian Katusha (e.g., Katyusha) multiple rocket launchers.

## Tanks

Tanks are widely used on the eastern front throughout the war. Sajer mentions tanks only in general terms, specifically referring to Mark II and Mark III tanks as being inadequately armored by 1943. He cites the German Mark V (Panther) and Mark VI (Tiger) as being excellent machines. He notes the Russian T-34 and KW-85 (presumably a KV-1 or perhaps the short-lived KV-85) are superior to the earlier German tanks and the T-34 is roughly equivalent to the Panther, though the Tiger reigns supreme. In one memorable episode (p. 257) the appearance of ten Russian tanks causes tens of thousands of German soldiers to rout in panic. Sajer also mentions a T-37 whose appearance would have been unusual and later refers to three "Stalin" tanks (p. 344; probably an IS-1). By February, 1944, the Russians are also utilizing U.S.-built Sherman tanks (p. 346).

## Airplanes

Sajer mentions several types of airplanes in the book. American and British bombers, mentioned only as bombers, are seen destroying Madgeburg and Tempelhof. Russian planes, notably the Yak (presumably Yak-1), often strafe and bomb the units around Sajer. Another interpretation is that Sajer refers to all Russian airplanes as a Yak though he occasionally uses the generic term Yabo. Sajer also mentions the Russian Ilyushin (probably Il-2). The German Luftwaffe's primary combat planes noted in the book are the Junkers Ju 87 (Stuka), the Messerschmitt Bf 109 (sometimes referred to as an ME-109), and the Fock-Wulf Fw 190. A twin-engine Messerschmitt is also mentioned, presumably a Bf 110. Sajer presents the Luftwaffe planes as vastly superior to the Russian planes, but also vastly outnumbered. By the end of 1943 the Luftwaffe is virtually a non-presence on the eastern front. Nearly every time an enemy plane attacks infantry units in the book, massive casualties result.



## Memel

Memel is a city in Prussia, at least during the period described by Sajer. It is the primary locale of Chapter 17. It is today known as Klaipėda and is part of Lithuania. The formal conquest of Memel by the Russians during World War II is usually considered to have occurred on 28 January, 1945; it is unclear in the narrative if Sajer evacuates before or after this precise date but in any case his evacuation is quite close to this date. The time Sajer spends in Memel represents the worst period of fighting discussed in the book. The German defenders are entirely surrounded and pushed back against the sea. Supplies and food are virtually non-existent, medical treatment and rest facilities are not available, and heavy Russian forces continually compress the German defenses around the city. Evacuations by sea are haphazard and often prevented by persistent and strong Russian air power.

## Gross Deutschland

The Gross Deutschland Division (or Großdeutschland) is an élite infantry regiment—Sajer refers to it frequently as a division. Members are distinguished by wearing a distinctive insignia on their sleeves. Sajer, Hals, and others join the unit as volunteers and remain in the unit for several months of combat.

## Alsace

Alsace is a region in France that borders the national border shared with Germany. The region has changed hands between the two nations several times, being fully annexed by France by 1871 when, during the Franco-Prussian war France ceded Alsace to Germany. Following World War I Alsace reverted to France from 1919 through 1940. Nazi Germany conquered and occupied Alsace from 1940 through 1944. Following World War II, Alsace reverted to France. Sajer is living in Alsace when it is conquered by Germany and subsequently joins the German military.



# Themes

## Hopelessness of War

The dominant theme of the autobiography is the hopelessness of war. The narrative is delivered in a subjective, autobiographical methodology that does not attempt to present a history of the war or even a history of specific events in the war. The author does not state dates and many places are noted only as being so-many-miles-from a major urban center. Of course these types of details are available in other published materials; their inclusion in the current narrative is not needed. Instead, the book attempts to be a portrayal of a single point of view during combat and wartime. Sajer's point of view attempts to establish the hopelessness of war. Nothing positive comes out of the war for any of the participants; the entire narrative is full of destruction, death, maiming, criminality, terror and terrorism, and hatred. The Germans hate the Russians and the Russians hate the Germans. Russian and Polish partisans hate the Germans. The Germans believe all partisans are terrorists. Prisoners are routinely executed. Captured Germans are routinely tortured to death. German corpses are often horribly mutilated. Rape is common; children are not spared either rape or murder. Civilians are routinely brutalized and have their goods stolen. Even within the ranks of the German military racism is rampant with full-blooded Germans denigrating their fellow soldiers of mixed heritage (for example, Sajer). Indoctrinated Hitlerjugend soldiers hold experienced veterans in contempt. Aside from the brutalities of war, disease is rampant, starvation is common, and soldiers routinely freeze to death. Medical services are so insufficient that wounded men are routinely abandoned to their fate and on several occasions are executed by fellow soldiers as a form of mercy. Throughout this period suicide is common, insanity is common, and cruelty becomes so commonplace as to be unremarkable. The entire narrative argues the futility of war and the hopelessness of the individual condition within wartime.

## Destructiveness of War

Sajer repeatedly focuses on the incredible destructiveness of modern war. The destruction of bodies at the front is often nearly complete—Sajer notes numerous instances of soldiers being converted into bloody paste or fragments of bodies raining to the ground after massive explosions. Even those who survive are often mutilated. Beyond the front, however, the destruction continues. Villages are bombed or shelled into rubble, houses are burned, railroad tracks and rolling stock are blown up or derailed, crops are burned, animals are shot, and civilians are killed. Whole cities are reduced to rubble by aerial bombardment. During his initial trip east Sajer passes through several major urban centers that have escaped most destruction. As he retreats west only a few years later he finds the same cities masses of rubble. Sajer states that the Russian countryside is so vast as to be nearly infinite—but yet by 1944 it is littered with the ruined hulks of fighting vehicles, trucks, cars, trains, and the rotting corpses of soldiers. Throughout their experiences on the east front the typical German soldier



continues to believe that Germany itself, particularly in the west, has escaped all this destruction. Yet when Sajer and others return to the west they find that German cities have been utterly destroyed by Allied bombardment. Just as London has been bombed, Berlin has been bombed even more. Even as soldiers on the front starve, extensive rationing in Germany causes much civilian distress. The theme of the absolute destructiveness of war reaches a focal point during the German defense of Memel where the destruction becomes so commonplace that people standing in line for evacuation by sea do not even run to air raid shelters when actively bombed and strafed.

## **The Vanquished Have no Victory**

Perhaps the most-controversial theme of the book concerns Sajer's contention that the German army loses its history and indeed meaning because it is vanquished. For Sajer, this is a personal tragedy. For years he and his closest friends face untold violence and oppressive conditions but perform heroic feats of arms against numerically vastly superior foes. It is indisputable that the German military performs excellently throughout much of the fighting on the east front—but given the international contempt in which Nazi Germany has been held since the advent of World War II no one is willing to champion these military forces associated inextricably with Nazism. Sajer drives this point home during the concluding pages of the autobiography where he considers his service in the French army after World War II. Here he finds an army full of boasting veterans who are proudly and anxiously accepted by their nation as heroes. Even though most of the men have tenuous and suspicious claims to involvement, they all have volumes of personal heroic war stories that are eagerly heard. German soldiers, however, do not. It is not that such events did not occur, but instead that the German nation is vanquished. It is not allowed a national history of heroism; it is not allowed a post-war period of positive introspection. Instead, Germany is vilified and German soldiers are rejected as a significant source of history and sense of achievement. Indeed, the vanquished have no victory.



# Style

## Perspective

The autobiography is written from the first-person, subjective point of view common to most autobiography. The author does not attempt to provide a precise history or even chronology but instead focuses on his subjective experiences during the period described. Chronologically, the book is organized in a typical fashion but numerous entries return to time periods already covered in summary and explore them in greater detail. Most events are noted only as happening within a given season (for example, spring or winter) or month. Several events in the book can be dated precisely because of their historic nature, though the author does not provide this dating. As an eye-witness participant to the events described the author is clearly reliable. The author is present in virtually every event described. He relates personal experiences in some great historical events and does not try to provide supplementary details that might place the material in a greater historical context. Instead, the reader is assumed to be familiar with the general causes and outcomes of World War II and to have some familiarity with events on the eastern front during that conflict. Several details in the book are known to be wrong in specifics if not general; for example, the author states the divisional insignia was worn on the left sleeve while in fact it was worn on the right sleeve. These minor inconsistencies have led to some claims that the work is fabricated or partially fabricated; these claims have been adequately rebuffed. The author has made very few post-publication statements about the book.

## Tone

The book's tone is subjective and quite depressed. There is no doubt that the author views war as destructive, nearly pointless, and hopeless. The individuals in the book suffer constant hunger, deprivation, exposure, and hardships. They are expected to forego sleep and food for extended periods of time. They are expected to work hard constantly. They are exposed to constant danger. They are often fearful and indeed many individuals commit suicide or go insane. Horrific conditions prevail throughout the autobiography and the tone that emerges is somber and horrifying. Death and terrible injury become so commonplace that they elicit no response at all. Dying men are viewed as already dead—agony is unfortunate but unremarkable. Hate and fear are omnipresent.

As a result of the nature of Sajer's experiences in World War II, the autobiography has a markedly depressing and gritty tone. It is difficult to read of tens of thousands of young German and Russian soldiers losing their lives in a few hours without a sense of despondency and macabre fascination. Sajer usually couples essentially horrifying experiences such as these with a sense of overarching despair. The intermediate section of the book, dealing with Paula, is softer in tone and easier to read. Sajer

typically treats friends with gentleness and glosses over the poor behaviors and boorish traits of others.

## Structure

The 465 page book, originally published in English in 1967, contains an author's preface, a prologue, and an epilogue, and a main body which is divided into five named and enumerated parts. Each part is divided into chapters; Parts One, Two, and Three have three chapters; Part Four has six chapters; Part Five has four chapters. Chapters are of unequal length and tend to deal with a specific series of events localized by time and geography. Later editions may include photographic materials and may include forward information though the text remains essentially identical. The book has been published in multiple languages and was originally written in French with some German phrases. The translation history is complex with most of the English-language version being translated from French. The English-language version retains German language phrases and has several difficult points of translation, notably when dealing with military ranks and military equipment.

In general, the text is presented in a chronological order and is very accessible. One repeated exception to precise chronology is the tendency of the book to review a period in summary and then return to the same period in detail. This is not particularly difficult but should be noted. The writing is concise and professional and the text is enjoyable and informative. The autobiography is frequently cited as one of the best and most authentic non-fiction books about the war.





## Quotes

"We are the last seven survivors in this place. Four of us are wounded. We have been entrenched in the wreckage of the tractor factory for four days. We have not had any food for four days. I have just opened the last magazine for my automatic. In ten minutes the Bolsheviks will overrun us. Tell my father that I have done my duty, and that I shall know how to die. Long live Germany! Heil Hitler!" (p. 54)

He would never have believed me. By that time I belonged to the Victorious Allies, who were all heroes, like every French soldier I met after the war. Only victors have stories to tell. We, the vanquished, were all cowards and weaklings by then, whose memories, fears, and enthusiasms should not be remembered. (p. 86)

Although he had married a German woman, my father did not feel particularly friendly toward Germany. He had never shaken off the hatreds of the 1914-18 war, although he himself had been well treated when he was a prisoner. However, the fact that one of his sons had been stuck into the German army prevented him from listening to Radio London with any sense of relief. (p. 144)

The thunder of bombs once again filled the air of the martyred city. German soldiers never run away. I, who had run from the Don to Kharkov, knew that perfectly well—although it must be admitted that German soldiers could fight against odds as great as thirty to one—as in Russia, for instance. From the hole into which Paula and I had dived, we were able to watch the avalanche which flattened a third of the airfield and ninety percent of Tempelhof. (p. 149)

One of the Junge Löwen got up and walked over to the veteran.

"Sir," he said in the assured voice of a law or medical student, "will you please explain your defeatist attitude, which is sapping the morale of everyone here."

"You just let me whistle my own tune," said the other, who appeared unimpressed by a flowery turn of speech.

"But I'm afraid I must insist on a reply," said the young man.

"And I say you're a bunch of fatheads, who won't begin to think until you've been cracked on your nice little skulls." (p. 172)

The tank, followed by two others, passed very close to us, thrusting toward the enemy position we had already been peppering for several minutes. In no time, it had crossed the trench, which was overflowing with the bodies of Russian soldiers. Then a second and a third tank plunged through the bloody paste, and rolled on, their treads stuck with horrible human remnants. Our noncom gave an involuntary cry of horror at the sight. Soon the young soldiers fresh from the sportive pleasures of the barracks would arrive at this foul reality. We heard a cry of horror, followed by one of victory, as the first assault wave continues to advance." (p. 184)



The slightest protuberance offered some hope of survival, as a wall of fire passed over the two thousand troops concentrated on that spot. The wounded, abandoned in the open, lay writhing in the dust. Through the uproar, we could hear the sound of disarticulated bodies falling back to the ground in broken pieces. As at Belgorod, the earth shook, and everything trembled and grew dim, as the whole landscape suddenly became mobile. (p. 251)

We had all learned to use waiting periods for sleep whenever we could, simply to stop thinking and lapse into unconsciousness. Reflection added nothing to such times except increased awareness of the misery that weighed on the world. Sleep, on the other hand helped in many ways: it blotted out the present, and revived one's strength. It seemed most unfortunate that one couldn't store up a surplus of its benefits to use in future emergencies when sleep would be impossible. (p. 303)

We abandoned the territory to the Red waves that followed us. This was the final passage of the last European crusade—in the complete sense of the word. (p. 340)

We remembered once again the tragic deaths at the territorial posts all along our line of retreat during the winter: faces smashed open with axes, so that the gold teeth could be pulled out; the hideous agony of wounded men tied with their heads inside the gaping bellies of dead comrades; amputated genitals; Ellers' section, whom we had found tied up and naked, on a day when the temperature had dropped to thirty degrees below zero, with their feet thrust into a drinking trough which had frozen solid; and the faces of tortured men under the dark winter sky.... (p. 373)

What would be done with these troops? Where were they expected to perform? There was no answer to these questions. Were the authorities going to try to stop the Red Army with them? The comparison seemed tragic and ludicrous. Would Total War devour these children? Was Germany heroic, or insane? Who would ever be able to judge this absolute sacrifice? We stood in profound silence, watching and listening to the final moments of this first adolescence. There was nothing else we could do. (p. 396)

This was only a small encounter, which seemed without importance to men accustomed to tornadoes of fire—a few fragments of brass hurtling through the dusk, breaking a shoulder, crushing a breastbone, or carrying off a life—nothing, in short, which even approximated the pitch of a real battle. Of course, if the same exchange should take place in Paris today, it would be considered sufficiently serious to empty a whole section of the city, and make all the headlines; each time has its own habits and style.... (p. 406)

I feel now as though I was born to experience that test. Memel had become the summit of my life, the ultimate peak, with only the infinite beyond it. We felt that after Memel nothing of us would remain, and that the life we would experience in the future would be like the crutches one offers to a cripple. Memel is the tomb of my life, the absolute. (p. 425)



I make no appeals to humanity, and cry for no vengeance. Except for these lines I remain silent, because I have lost my power of discretion. I have also learned, in my solitude, that there is no power more unalterable than the power of forgiveness. (p. 435)



## Topics for Discussion

Should Sajer be considered a Nazi? Why or why not?

Sajer repeatedly notes that the German army considered Russian and Polish partisans to be terrorists, because they wore no uniform, represented no recognized government, resorted to brutal measures, and often tortured and mutilated German prisoners. Do you agree with Sajer that the partisans were terrorists?

Sajer reports that the German soldiers were shocked at the intense anti-German feelings of many civilians in occupied Poland and Russia. Why do you think the Germans were so surprised by this commonly held bias?

The German military used official propaganda reporting and tightly-controlled media to mislead front-line soldiers about conditions at home and the overall progress of the war. Do you think that modern governments and armies use similar techniques to convince fighting men to continue fighting? Discuss.

As the German army advanced into Russia its supply situation became increasingly desperate. Yet Sajer reports that as the Russian army advanced toward and into Germany, their supply situation seemed to improve almost daily. How can you explain this difference?

Sajer reports that Russian soldiers were sometimes equipped with American rifles, and that Russian soldiers sometimes operated American tanks and planes. How do you think the Russian army obtained American equipment? Discuss.

When Sajer reaches the west front he finds that most of the German soldiers there are eager to surrender to British forces. Once he surrenders, he is treated well. On the east front, Germans who surrendered were typically executed. Why do you think the British were so sympathetic toward German prisoners of war while the Russians were not?