

Michal Warzager Giving A Speech



This is when I gave a speech about my war experiences in the Soviet army. I did that two or three times on different occasions.

A month or so after the start of the Great Patriotic War, I was summoned to the conscription office. The commission sat at a table, and they didn't ask any questions about anyone's health or anything, just declared us 'fit to serve, fit to serve, fit to serve'. There were several of us there, and they took us all. After two weeks of training we were sent off to the front. We wound up outside Leningrad - the 185th independent infantry regiment - I remember exactly how I was assigned to that unit. And the liberation of Leningrad began. I remember how harsh the winter was - it must have been January or February when they broke the siege. I remember it was bitterly cold, and the snow was so deep. It was very tough going. If we'd been in the woods, we could've hidden behind trees, but this was out in the open, not even a bush - nothing grows on the water. If I'd been in some other place maybe I would've gone into hiding somehow, but there was no way I could manage it there. And I was real brave - I took chances, because I knew my parents were already old, maybe even dead, so I thought to myself: I don't have anybody, what difference does it make if they kill me or not? You just kept on pushing forward. Who cares - when they said 'Charge!', I charged. I just stuck my head out a little, and the warrant officer - he was Jewish too - started yelling at me: was I trying to get myself killed, or what? And there was a bang and it threw me back into the trench. I just wanted to see what was going on out there on the water. All I caught sight of was people dropping like flies and they were just lying there in heaps. A fellow was alive one minute, dead the next. Later I remember some officers standing there discussing something. There were orders against gathering in groups - we had to stay separate. And these officers were standing in a group when some kind of missile hit them and blew everything to high heavens. I saw that from the trench.

There was no way to approach Leningrad from any direction except from the lake [Lake Ladoga]. There were planes patrolling it, and they sank a lot of ships, and barges loaded with food, they all went down with men on board. It's a very deep lake. And then - in 1943 it must have been - we launched an offensive. It was all prepared; the artillery shot at the Germans for 50 or 60 minutes,

and they thought they'd cleared everyone out of there. And the order came: 'Forward, march!' We had to forge the river at a run. There were no Germans on the river, but further on they were sitting in trenches. We gave them a beating, it's true. We all rushed out onto the river - it's pretty wide. The ice was a meter or two thick, and even tanks could cross it. I got hit out on that river - in the arm and the leg. And I thought to myself: 'So that's the end of the war for you, Warzager old chap!' I didn't know - I thought maybe I'd die or something, because I didn't know just what had happened. The orderlies found me there, and there was a dugout shelter with doctors. They bandaged me up and took me by sleigh to the field hospital. The doctor there took a look and said: 'We're going to amputate those toes.' I begged him not to, in Russian, thinking they'd somehow heal, but he didn't respond. They knocked me out and when I woke up I had no toes.