Mendl Mann
The Fall of Berlin

Mendl Mann’s autobiographical novel, The Fall of Berlin, tells the painful yet compelling story of life as a Jewish soldier in the Red Army. Menakhem Isaacovich is a Polish Jew who, after fleeing the Nazis, finds refuge in the USSR. The novel follows Menakhem as he fights on the front line in Stalin’s Red Army against Hitler and the Nazis who are destroying his homeland of Poland and exterminating the Jews.

Menakhem encounters anti-Semitism on various occasions throughout the narrative, and struggles to comprehend how seemingly normal people could hold such appalling views. As Mann writes, it is odd that “vicious, insidious anti-Semitism could reside in a person with elevated feelings, an average person, a decent person”.

The Fall of Berlin is both a striking and timely look at the struggle that many Jewish soldiers faced. Skillfully translated from Yiddish and introduced by Maurice Wolfthal, this is an affecting and unique book which eloquently explores a variety of themes – anti-Semitism, patriotism, Stalinism and life as a Jewish soldier in the Second World War.

The Fall of Berlin is essential reading for anyone interested in the Yiddish language, Jewish history, and the history of World War II. As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.

Menakhem toils in the Urals for months, working in the grueling, nauseating coal mines, along Cossacks, Tatars, Kazakhs, Georgians, Ukrainians, and other Jews. The food is both meager and revolting. Dreams of Poland, Tengushay, and Moscow haunt him. He longs to be back at the front. A military commission arrives to recruit prisoners, and Menakhem volunteers. Khatshapuridza, an antisemitic Party member, ridicules him, but Menakhem is mobilized, sent by train to Gorki, and assigned to a barracks.

He does not divulge his rank or how he ended up in the mines. A First World War veteran hums a song about Warsaw and the Vistula River. Menakhem hears that the Germans are still holding Smolensk. The miners assemble for inspection. Menakhem confesses that his scar is a battle wound, but he doesn’t mention his service in defense of Moscow. He sings proudly with the men as they return to the barracks.
January 1942. The Red Army and Soviet partisans have been repelling the Germans, liberating sixty cities. Anna Samuelovna has been working with a partisan unit outside Smolensk under Capt. Mikhailov. Politkommissar Zhillin is sent to join them. She wonders whether it’s a coincidence. She remembers their last meeting outside Moscow. She suspects that he and Suzayev had something to do with Menakhem’s disappearance. She tries to avoid him. She is sure that he arranged for her to be posted there after being assigned there himself.

Extremely upset when she returns to the field hospital, she steels herself for the arrival of planes to transport the seriously wounded, and for the partisans’ imminent advance into German territory. Unable to sleep, she returns to the hospital and runs into Zhillin. She asks if he knows what happened to Menakhem. First he stays silent, then he nonchalantly mentions a trial, a German prisoner, and being sentenced to the mines.

Capt. Mikhailov has refused to accept Belarussians or Jews into his partisan unit, except for Shimen Moiseyevich Gross, a Polish Jew who leads the reconnaissance men. He had fought the Germans in the streets when they occupied Warsaw in 1939 and had taken refuge in Justina’s apartment. Then he fled to Russia while Justina stayed behind. Zhillin now takes command, and he leads the unit towards Nadezhdino, where the Germans are quartered.

Menakhem, Zhillin, and her mother dominate Anna’s nightmares. At dawn, Gross tells her that two Jews were found in the village. Interrogated by Zhillin and Mikhailov, they say they’re soldiers who were ambushed but got away, one of them wounded. Zhillin calls them cowards and deserters. The wounded man is outraged and shows his scar. Anna asks to attend the interrogation but is not permitted to. Zhillin says he will let the men join the partisans only if they first hand over their machine gun—leaving them only a single revolver and some grenades—and then go blow up a German freight yard bridge.

Gross intercepts a German radio transmission that indicates their whereabouts. The partisans advance, the Germans retreat. German leaflets mock the partisans as being full of Jews who are fighting not for Russia, but only for themselves. The two Jews request a third man for their mission. Zhillin and Mikhailov refuse, expecting them to fail and thereby justify their rejection of Jews in the unit. Gross asks for a mission
to liberate Jewish refugees being held captive by Germans in the forest. Mikhailov again refuses but encourages him to stay in Russia after the war.

The partisans move into hamlets near Nadezhdino. Awaiting the coming battle, some partisans accuse the two Jews of having betrayed them. Zadurkin blames the Jews—“anti-Christ”—for the war itself. Gross warns him to shut up. When the fighting ends, the partisans find one of the Jewish soldiers hanging from a tree, the word “Jew” affixed to his back. Radio instructions from Moscow emphasize strict discipline and the political importance of stressing the Russian nationality of the partisan fighters. Gross tells Anna that he feels more Jewish now than ever before. Anna learns of the hanging and blames Zhillin for having driven the Jews away.

A Russian peasant named Mikhaliuk had betrayed the dead man to the Germans. The other, Mark Khinoy, fights his way out, and along with Jews from the woods, blows up the train bridge to the freight yard and lays mines that derail a German troop train. On his way back to the partisans, he recognizes Mikhaliuk and shoots him. Anna is loved by the peasants whose families she treats, but they often blame the Jews—“anti-Christ”—for Bolshevik rule and for the war.

One night, Zhillin, reeking of brandy, visits Anna’s hut. He declares his love, tries to embrace her and pushes her onto her bed. She resists and screams. He seethes because she loves Menakhem, a Jew, whom he had betrayed. He is summoned by Mikhailov and returns to find that the three Jews have returned and carried out his orders.

Zhillin doesn’t even recognize the men. Mikhailov predicts that the Germans will retaliate for their daring exploit, and preparations are made. A delegation of peasants comes from Nadezhdino, accusing the partisans of murdering one of their men. They identify the three Jews. Furious, Zhillin rants that the Jews’ obsession with being persecuted blinded them to commit murder, which reflects badly on the Soviets. He calls a meeting of the general staff, at which he announces a dawn attack, condemns the actions of the Jews, and sentences Khinoy to death.

Anna says Zhillin will have blood on his hands. Already drunk, he argues with her incoherently, throws her down, and lands on her. It is as if she were lying in a field of nettles. She struggles and manages to leave, with Zhillin’s aide Zadurkin laughing behind her. The attack on
Yermakovo is launched at dawn, with Shimen Gross in the vanguard. Anna races to join the forward detachment. As they move out, Zhillin retracts his order to execute Khinoy, in light of the ongoing extermination of the Jews. As the battle rages, Anna is taken prisoner, gives her name as Morozova Claudia Ivanovna, and is sent to a German labor camp in East Prussia. Mikhailov’s group occupies Yermakovo, but Zhillin and his unit are forced to retreat, to his shame. Gross decides to fight his way back to Poland on his own. Zhillin refuses to work with Jews from Smolensk who have been living in the nearby forest. But antisemitic peasants trick them into believing that he wants them to join his partisans. The peasants massacre them when they try to do so.

June 1944. The Germans are in retreat. Menakhem and others from the mines are battling on the Belarussian Front. He is summoned by Col. Yefimov, who knows that Menakhem has already fought at the front, was arrested, and was sent to the mines. Khatshap warns Menakhem that it’s dangerous for him to fraternize with Jewish civilian refugees. Menakhem eagerly fights the Germans in the woods to avenge the Jews murdered there by the peasants. His unit advances into East Prussia, and Menakhem is again assigned as an interpreter. He meets an antisemitic Polish aristocrat and accuses him of hating Jews and welcoming the Germans. Menakhem relishes the thought that Poland will now be occupied by the Soviets instead, and the Jews will return to the cities they had helped to build. He discovers that the aristocrat doesn’t know that his wife, Sabina, is Jewish. Menakhem urges her to flee when his unit pulls out.

Yefimov’s division heads for Warsaw by way of Mlawa, Ciechanow, Sochocin, and Płonsk, Menakhem’s childhood home. Yefimov assigns him to guide the troops and to help the men cross the Ukra River. Many cannot swim, and Menakhem saves one of them from drowning. A bullet shatters a bone in his hand, sending him to the hospital. He learns that Poles murdered Sabina, and that the Red Army is now approaching the banks of the Vistula outside Warsaw. Soviet bombers make daily raids, and the Germans are evacuating the city. A year after the Jews in the Ghetto launched their uprising, Soviet radio calls on the Poles to rise up against the Germans. The Red Army begins to move towards the Praga suburb, but sudden reinforcements of Panzer tanks strengthen German determination to hold the city.
As the Red Army nears the Vistula, the Polish insurrection breaks out in the city, wearing red and white armbands. Shimen Gross has made the long trek back to Warsaw after fighting to drive the Germans out of Vilna. He is greatly moved to be back in his hometown. He joins a group of Polish fighters who are not antisemitic as they battle the German Army in the streets. Behind the scenes, Soviet forces begin to disarm and deport Polish partisans. Gross and his men meet Jewish fighters who had survived the 1943 Ghetto uprising, as well as others who had fled from Hungary and Greece. Then they liberate the concentration camp on Gesia Street in the former Jewish Ghetto. Gross is horrified by the living skeletons he finds there. And he is pained that there are still Christian Poles murdering Jews while the Germans continue their atrocities. As incendiary bombs fall on the ruins of the Ghetto, he hopes against hope that Justina is still alive.

*Politkommissar* Zhillin infiltrates Warsaw, comes to resistance headquarters, and leads the Poles to believe that the Red Army is about to enter the city. Emilia, who had already fought in the Ghetto uprising, is sent with a message from the resistance to Marshal Rokossovksy at Soviet headquarters, and vows to return. Menakhem recuperates in a nearby village, triggering childhood memories, but the Jews are gone. The painful realization grows that Poland is no longer his homeland.

He rejoins his unit. Warsaw is in flames as they near the Vistula. He is again assigned to interpret. Menakhem and Shimen Gross struggle with deep despair. A battalion of Vlasov’s fascist army of Russians and Ukrainians terrorizes and massacres civilians. While the Germans continue their bombing raids, the Red Army fails to cross the Vistula. Menakhem cannot bear it any longer and asks to be sent into Warsaw on a mission. Yefimov denies his request, because, he says, he must put the interests of the USSR ahead of those of Menakhem’s homeland. In August 1944 Emilia parachutes into Warsaw from a Soviet U-2 plane, which also drops Lt. Zirkov behind enemy lines. She brings a letter making it clear that the Red Army is waiting for the Germans to crush the uprising, and that the insurgents should flee cross the Vistula. She

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1 Andrey A. Vlasov was a Red Army general who, when captured, defected to the Germans and organized a regiment that fought with the Germans against the Soviet Union and murdered Jews.
is sent to Monter;\(^2\) head of the *Armia Krajowa*\(^3\) in the Old Town, and can reach him only through the sewer system, through which she had fled the year before. Days later the Polish general staff begin to escape through the sewers.

Emilia is wounded and captured and taken to a field in Zielonki held by Vlasov’s men led by Antip, a Don Cossack. The Germans are using these Slavic auxiliaries to massacre civilians and attack the remaining insurgents in the Old Town. Lt. Zirkov has joined them and won their trust with antisemitic and anti-Soviet propaganda. His mission is to wean them away from German control. Groups break away, often drunk, wreaking havoc in the countryside. Women prisoners are brutalized and raped en masse in Zielonki. Emilia, protected and disguised as a Carmelite nun, leads a delegation to Antip to complain of the atrocities and accuses Shaliugin of murder. Zirkov is there, and he assures them that they will stop. Antip takes Shaliugin outside and executes him. Zirkov realizes that Emilia is not a nun, and that he has seen her before, in the airplane. He is terrified that she will betray his real identity to Antip. Her dead body is found the next day.

Antip’s men, joined by Hungarian fascists, Lithuanians, and Latvians, continue to massacre civilians and hunt for Jews. The Germans aim to totally obliterate Warsaw, which they had started to do in 1939. Food and water shortages weaken the insurgents. The uprising lasts sixty-three days, with little help from the Red Army. On October 2, 1944, a delegation of Poles surrenders to Gen. Von dem Bach. Jews remain in hiding in bunkers, cellars, and sewers, and they are still being betrayed to the Germans and murdered. The Germans send Antip’s battalion to guard along the Vistula, facing the Soviets, calculating that they are expendable. Zirkov goes with them, but he assassinates Antip as they approach the river, and takes command.

Soviet troops seize the German train taking Anna Samuelovna to slave labor. While exhilarated to be free, she still fears that Zhillin will find her. A riot erupts when some Soviet troops try to break into the

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2 This was the code name of Polish Col. Antoni Chrusciel, a leader of the *Armia Krajowa* resistance to the Germans, who was promoted to General when he led the 1944 uprising in Warsaw.

3 Polish: Home Army, the principal armed Polish resistance to the Germans during the Second World War.
women’s wagons to rape them. But they are stopped, and the train continues towards Poland. Yefimov’s division, including Menakhem’s unit, waits on the eastern bank of the Vistula. They can see that Warsaw is being reduced to rubble. Isolated civilians manage to escape. They read in their newspaper that Antip’s men shot him as they were crossing. By mid September, the Red Army has full control of the Praga suburb. The men relax, play cards, and sing to accordions. The streets are teeming with refugees, collaborators, deserters, and Vlasov’s men.

Anna Samuelovna is assigned to treat the wounded. She is tempted to join with Jewish survivors in the streets and evade Zhillin. One of her patients, Zakharchenko, is near death. Another, Capt. Isaac Farber, has a chest full of shrapnel. Just before Anna operates, she is horrified to learn that Zhillin is in Praga, and that he was promoted to colonel and decorated. Nurse Yekaterina Yurievna and old Dr. Leszniak see that she is overwrought and sympathize with her. Menakhem watches from Praga in despair, powerless, as his beloved Warsaw is being destroyed. Warsaw’s Jews have been exterminated. When the Red Army finally crosses the Vistula in January 1945, he walks through the ruins in a daze.