



## **ROZA'S WAR**

### **Diary of a Soviet Sniper**

Brenda Muller Ellis

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## INTRODUCTION

ROZA SHANINA was a member of the first generation of the Soviet experiment, born in 1924 in central Ukraine, where her father, Yegor Shanin, a Bolshevik Party Director, ran the *Bogdanovka* collective farm. The family left the area in 1932, during the height of the *Holodomor* (a man-made famine that decimated Ukraine,) possibly due to a need to escape the peasant uprisings against the increasingly brutal collectivization policies of the Communists. The Shanins moved to the village of Yedma, Arkhangelsk Oblast, Northern Russia, and settled there permanently, with Yegor Shanin serving as Party Director in charge of several collective farms. At age fourteen, Roza ran away from their home in Yedma after a fight with her father, and went to live her brother, Fyodor, in the city of Arkhangelsk, where she applied and was accepted into secondary school.

Three years later, in 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, taking the citizens and Stalin by complete surprise, so much so that Stalin refused to believe it. He and Hitler had a pact, an understanding, and mutual respect and esteem. Why would Hitler betray him, Josef Stalin? They agreed in every particular.

But Hitler never liked Stalin, called him a “sub-human ape” behind his back, and when the time was right, ordered his prized *Einsatzgruppen* “murder squads” to burn every village, rape every woman, leave no Slav alive on their warpath from Germany to the Kremlin in Moscow. The people and towns of Poland and Lithuania were decimated with sadistic zeal, but Stalin couldn’t face the truth until it was too late to mount a real defense. When he finally woke up, Stalin pulled his troops out of Finland and sent them

to beat back the Germans. But this was a small, weak Red Army, no more than an annoying fly to Germany's elite *Wehrmacht*, who swatted it away with ease.

Now Stalin had a real problem. Hitler was after him, and what could he do, with no real army? Three years earlier, during the Great Purge of 1938, a paranoid Stalin had executed nearly all of his officers and commanders to stamp out the possibility of a military coup, and in 1941, he had few soldiers and almost no one with any military experience to lead them. Stalin issued a widespread draft, put his yes-men in positions of command, and sent everyone off to defend the Motherland. They were annihilated—millions of young Soviet boys died—including Mikhail and Fyodor Shanin, two of Roza Shanina's older brothers.

Roza's life changed dramatically after the war began. Fyodor, her brother/protector in Arkhangelsk, was conscripted almost immediately into the Red Army, and Roza was on her own. Before the war, secondary school had been free, and students received a stipend and a dormitory room to live in. During the war, tuition was charged, student stipends were canceled and dormitory rooms were too expensive to be practical. Roza was forced to leave school and find work to pay for room and board. She was fortunate to get hired as a school teacher at the Kindergarten #2 in Arkhangelsk. The job came with a small apartment attached to the Kindergarten, and Roza used her almost all of modest income to pay tuition so she could continue her education.

When Roza's supervisor at the Kindergarten #2, Anna Tamarova, found her passed out from hunger and exhaustion in the little office behind her classroom (wearing her only dress, which was gray, made of paper,) she went to some trouble to make sure Roza's position was secure, and got permission for her to eat with the students in the school cafeteria. With these arrangements, Roza was able to



survive the first years of the war, finish secondary school and one year at university, and get some real clothes.

Acts of kindness, such as that of Anna Tamarova, happened often during this time. The normal dangers and fears of Soviet life were displaced by the war—everything was *For the Front!* Citizens found themselves able to look out for one another without fear of standing out, of being labeled an *Enemy of the People*. The whisperers went quiet, and unity was the thing, a new and beautiful thing, which created a patriotic zeal that helped to support the red fury that the Communist Party propagandized amongst the people. *Destroy the Enemy!* was the constant cry. *Crush the Fascist Beast!* Everyone was wild to join the fight, to put their lives on the line for their comrades. Here was meaning, here was purpose! The competition was stoked; who could give more, who was truly selfless?

When Roza heard of her brother Mikhail's death at Leningrad, followed by Fyodor's disappearance and probable death at Stalingrad, she was ready to go to the ends of the earth to avenge her brothers, to prove her worth. She spent a full year trying to enlist, reportedly banging down the doors of Red Army officers, but was turned down again and again. *No females allowed*, was the reply at first. Later, after the Red Army had lost almost an entire generation of young men, and began to accept females in their ranks, they decided that women were well suited to sniper work, due to their higher percentage of body fat and naturally patient dispositions. The Women's Central Sniper School was formed, and began enrolling Soviet females who were physically fit, had passed at least seven secondary school classes, and had gone through a four-day *Vsevobuch* basic training program. Roza applied and was accepted in June 1943.

Prior to boarding the train to the frontlines on April 2, 1944, Roza met her mother, sister, and younger brothers in Bereznik, a town near Yedma where her Aunt Agnes lived and where Roza had

attended middle school. During this farewell visit, Roza was gifted a blank journal by her younger sister, Yulia. *Roza's War* is a fictional re-creation of that journal, built upon known facts about the real-life Roza Shanina's time at the Front during World War Two.



# Manuscript Book

29.94 - In the year  
 of the jubilee  
 the year of grace  
 a happy birthday  
 anniversary, we  
 celebrate the  
 day of the  
 birth of the  
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 jubilee.

FIRST JOURNAL:  
**SPRING**





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## 2.Apr.44

### On a train, somewhere between Moscow and Smolensk

Finally, the train has left the Moscow station. What a mash up! Six hundred girl snipers crowded onto the platform, set to be deployed, waiting and waiting in the soft rain, when a fat captain with red cheeks called us to attention, put his hands and his hips and hollered “Well girls, are you here to fight or to fuck?” Can you believe it? Then came the muttering—*What’s the difference? What the devil?* and *Mudak*<sup>1</sup>—but I think the captain didn’t catch on (thank the gods!) because he just kept preaching at us about how we mustn’t act like *zenschinas*<sup>2</sup> when we get to the frontlines. We only escaped when a sergeant came to hand out papers.

Not an auspicious beginning, but I won’t let it bring me down. Now, the train speeds toward the frontlines, toward my destiny as a sniper on the Western Front. I’ve been working toward this moment for so long, so many years of training and longing to distinguish myself, to fight against the evil creatures who have so insulted our people. I want to be a great and extraordinary warrior. My will is strong—I wish with a thousand wishes that my ability will meet my desire. I did well at sniper school, but war must be different, must have bigger challenges. And they’ve made me commander, although I’ve never been a boss. It seems like it would be better to give orders than follow them, I’m not at all sure. I don’t like to tell people what to do, but I’ll have to, in this job. Will I be good at it?

---

1 *Mudak*: Russian slang for jerk or asshole.

2 *Zenschina*: Russian for whore. Interestingly, there is no Russian word for woman – females are either *devotchkas* (girls), *babushkas* (grandmothers), or *zenschinas*.

But here is home, this journal in my hands, to soothe my nerves. Such a thoughtful gift, Yulia. You always understand me best. Oh, how I love to write! Putting things down on paper sets my thoughts in order like nothing else. Nothing can bother me too much, as long as I can write about it.

Next stop, Smolensk, and then we will be transported in some way into Belorussia, to Vitebsk, where I will be commander of the girls' sniper platoon of the 184th Rifle Division, Fifth Army, Western Front. And my new life will begin.




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**3.Apr.44**

**Sitting on my bunk, new platoon quarters**

When I jumped off the train at Smolensk, a blue cap<sup>3</sup> was waiting for me on the platform. He approached, said "You are Roza Shanina?" and handed me a letter, which turned out to be from our brother Sergei. God and Hell, Yulia, such a letter! And why did he send it to me, of all people? I must be Sergei's least favorite sibling. But I guess I'm the only one in the army who is still alive. Maybe that makes me convenient.



*Dear Roza,*

*This is the first letter I've written you. You think me a bad brother, and perhaps it's true. I've never been what Fyodor*

---

3 SMERSH officers, commonly known as "blue caps," were security agents whose primary job was counter-intelligence for the Red Army, and routing out anti-Soviet elements in military and civilian populations.



*was to you. I was blinded by Papa, always seeing you as he did, as the thorn in his side. Now the blindfold has been ripped off and I see that you were right all along, that I am the stupid one. Where have duty and loyalty gotten me? In prison, labeled a traitor.*

*Now I must kiss the dirt and beg a favor. I need you to bring this letter to Papa. You'll read it, to know what you carry, to know my situation, and that's fine. I'm sorry to burden you. Sorry for everything. I'm desperate. You must have some leave coming up. Do your big brother a favor and take your leave in Yedma.*

*Ostat'sya v zhivyykh,*<sup>4</sup>  
*Serge*




---

**19.March.44**  
**Lubyanka prison,<sup>5</sup> Moscow**

*Dear Papa,*

*Trouble has found me and I write to beg your help. On the 18th of March, I was put on trial and convicted of three charges: abuse of power, failure to carry out orders, and misconduct in the presence of the enemy. This is some sort of terrible mistake, or else somebody wants me dead. They've*

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4 Russian for "stay alive."

5 The Lubyanka building in Moscow was the headquarters of the NKVD and contained a prison on the two uppermost floors that was used mostly for political prisoners.

*thrown me into a prison cell in the Lubyanka and sentenced me to ten years hard labor. I requested a retrial, naturally, and I think it must have been allowed, because I'm still here in prison rather than on my way to Siberia, but how can I hope for a different outcome from the second trial if nothing changes?*

*You pushed me to the NKVD,<sup>6</sup> to this hard life that has made me fall so far from who I used to be. I've fought with myself to be a good worker, and I've served faithfully for two years. I've done some hard and terrible things, under their orders, and now they call me a traitor and invent charges against me. You have the ear of some powerful people in the Politburo. I beg your help to get me out of hard labor, or worse. If not for myself then for Maria, and for your new grandson, Alexei Sergeivich, who doesn't deserve to lose his father before he's learned to walk. I have nowhere else to turn.*

*Your son,  
Sergei*



Poor Sergei! But what does he think I can do about it? I just got here, how can I possibly take leave to deliver his letter? Probably, he's heard only that I enlisted and went to sniper school, and doesn't know that I've just been deployed. And yet, if a blue cap could get to Smolensk, he could surely get to Papa in Yedma. But the Party might be watching Papa.

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6 The NKVD, or the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, was the precursor to the KGB, widely-known and feared for their brutal methods of repression. SMERSH was a branch of the NKVD.

I suppose it makes sense, but it's a lousy birthday present. I'll have to keep it hidden until I figure out what to do.

I'm twenty years old today. I don't expect any attention, but turning twenty hasn't been the milestone I always imagined it would be. More like gravel. No one here even knows to wish me cheer, but you'll think of me, Yulechka.

Stupid Sergei! How could he get himself thrown into prison? He, a blue cap! I expect he has done "hard and terrible things." How am I supposed to feel about that? Do I even want to help him?

Sorry. I know you love him so. He is my brother. I mustn't judge without more information. How I wish he hadn't sent that letter to me! Because now, if I don't get it to Papa before the retrial, I will share in the responsibility for Sergei's ruin, and maybe his death.



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#### 4.4.44, 21:17 Platoon billet

We saw our first action today, in the trenches along the south road that leads into Vitebsk. *Too fast!* some of the girls complained, wanting more time to settle into our new quarters, but you will know that it suited me fine. I was glad for the distraction.

The platoon is billeted to an old farmhouse east of Vitebsk. It's thin, has very little in it, but it's all ours. I have so much to tell you about this place, about all of the people I've met, but first I want to write about work.

Our orders today were to watch Vitebsk's south road, and shoot any Nazi officers who came along, ignoring the lower ranks as they aren't worth giving away our position. Last week, the 5th Army

forced Fritz<sup>7</sup> to retreat from Smolensk back to Vitebsk, and now we are called in as part of the effort to make sure they don't push back.

We dropped into the trenches before sunrise, my trigger finger itchy to try out my new M44 Mosina. It's not brand new, but what a beauty! Five-shot, bolt-action, internal magazine, with a 3.5 PU fixed scope and a range up to 1000 m—the most powerful rifle I've ever held in my hands. We shot some Mosinas at sniper school, but they were the M38-40s with the old-style scopes. We also shot Berdans, but they're just single-shots, only good at close range. My new Mosina is a much finer piece of machinery, and it's all mine. Most of the snipers have names for their rifles—I'll need to think of a good one.

Do you remember how Papa described the trenches in the Great War? He said they were huge tunnels that made up a giant maze, with whole villages inside. Ours are nothing like that—there's only room for two or three snipers in a trench hole. Sometimes only one. Sometimes we dig shallow passages between the trenches, to make a long trench line, and today we were working in this kind of connected trench system.

Lida Vdovina, from sniper school, was my partner, and we stood in the mud for hours, watching and waiting. You would not like this work, Yulia, especially now, with the constant rains of the *raputitsa*<sup>8</sup> upon us. The trenches are mucky holes in the ground, like Aunt Agnes' pigsties but somehow so much worse because of the rats (who, like the pigs, eat anything that you leave lying around, and not just food,) and maybe also because we are trapped there and can't move around much at all. Lida set her ration on top of her rucksack for two seconds and we saw it snatched away out of

---

7 Nazis were commonly referred to as "Fritz" or "Fritzes" by the Soviets during WW2.

8 *Raputitsa*: the rainy season in Russia, also commonly used to describe the muddy, impassable roads of the rainy season.

the corner of our eyes, with a flash of something gray. For an hour after that, I couldn't shake the feeling that little beady eyes were constantly watching us. But it does no good to think about such things, and really it's a huge distraction from keeping watch on the road, so we put it out of our minds and took turns scanning the road for hours, for such a long time with nothing more interesting to look at than an occasional truck. It seemed a thousand hours passed like this, and I was becoming more and more certain that nothing would ever happen, when Lida said—"that Fritz?"

I jumped up and grabbed my binoculars to have a look, and saw a car speeding south from the city, the open-style car that German officers prefer, carrying two men. As they came closer, I saw that their uniforms were blue, and that one of them wore an officer's cap. How amazing, that he wore his rank so boldly!

I tracked him through the binoculars, saw his pale face, his strong nose and black goggles. Young, maybe my age, or not much older. I switched over to my M44 and peered through my scope with my heart in my ears, my senses tingling. The car wasn't going fast, with the extreme mud of the *raputitsa* roads, so I had plenty of time to calculate the deflective distance and set my sights parallel to the middle of his chest, like they trained us to do for moving targets at sniper school. I was on target—he was in range, the car was practically in front of us, it was time to fire, and I froze. I knew my orders, knew exactly what to do, but my body wouldn't obey.

Every person I knew, everything that has ever happened to me was yelling *Shoot!* in my head, and then I thought, *Why me?* Why was I the one to make this decision? But then, it wasn't really *my* decision, I was following orders. But orders don't pull triggers, Yulia, and in that moment I felt my power. A man's life would end with my action. Was I really going to kill someone?

I wondered about the man himself, whose life was in my cross-hairs. Was he a loyal Nazi, or was he forced into service? Or maybe

this was a Russian boy, forced to dress as a Nazi officer and drive by our trench. How could I tell the difference?

I could miss, or I could shoot to injure, and no one would know my intention. My aim is very good, Yulia. But I had to fire my rifle. I couldn't stand the judgment that would come from doing nothing. From nothing, I would be called Coward. If I shot and missed the kill, I'd be judged incompetent, and not just by others, but also by myself. I had to kill this man, or I would never do well as a sniper. I wouldn't be useful to my country, would never get any medals, never be a great and exceptional warrior. If I shot true, I might have all of those things, and I'd also be a killer.

These thoughts took over everything, like a screaming baby, and I couldn't focus. I needed to act, to take my shot, before the chance was lost.

Suddenly Fyodor was there, in a memory that pushed up to the surface. *Fascist beasts!* he cried, his face contorted. We'd been looking at a photograph in *Pravda*<sup>9</sup> just after the Germans invaded. A young Lithuanian girl hung from a tree, naked, blood smeared from between her legs all the way down to her feet, someone's home burning in the background. Fyodor had been so angry, so full of hate!

Remembering Fedya at that moment, and how he died at Leningrad, months later, all I could think was that I wanted someone to pay, Yulia. I was crying and I couldn't breathe past the ball in my throat, but I fired my weapon, and I knew my aim was true as soon as I squeezed the trigger. Through my scope, I saw the bullet tear into the Nazi's chest. I watched the torso slam back hard, the head snap over the bench, the body slide into stillness.

---

9 *Pravda* (the Russian word for "truth") was the widely-distributed official magazine of Soviet communism from 1918–1991. It was required reading for party members, used largely to spread propaganda.

And then I was giddy, almost euphoric, and everything turned sharp and bright. *I got him!* I thought, and felt the urge to leap out of the trench and chase down the car to see the dead body. It seemed that one jump would have sent me soaring twenty feet into the air, and I tensed, wanting that jump. But then every muscle in my body seemed to melt, and I slid down the side of the trench.

*I've killed a man.* I must have said this out loud, because suddenly Lida put her hand on my shoulder.

"You killed a fascist," she said. "Great shot!"

I needed to hear that, and I found a smile for Lida. The rest of the afternoon, I moved with a bit more zip, and *an eye for an eye* kept running through my mind. You know what that means—if someone gouges out someone's eye, they should be punished by losing their own eye. So this Nazi officer had it coming to him, because his people killed our big brother. But that specific guy didn't kill Fedya. Did he deserve to die? And if he did, do I deserve to die for killing him? If we follow that logic, who will be left who deserves to live!

Certainly, we know that life and death aren't fair. What is life? What is death? Why live? Live, until you die, comes the answer. Live, because we are here.

Later, I made a mark in my gray book and the girls congratulated me on opening my tally. After dinner, I went to bed with everyone else, early, so we can get to the trenches before the sun comes up tomorrow, and in the darkness, I started crying and couldn't stop. I wasn't sobbing, it was more like tears and sniffles that wouldn't stop coming. I was sure that my new bunkmates, Sasha Ekimova and Kaleriya Petrova, who I barely know, could hear everything and I was ashamed. But then Sasha was there, right next to my bunk, whispering to me.

"It's okay, Roza, cry as much as you want. It happens to everyone the first time. It gets easier."

“It does?” I asked, sounding like a small child.

“Much. I promise.”

Then she climbed back into her bunk, and my shame was overcome by gratitude. I won’t say the shame disappeared, but I felt so much better in knowing that someone cared enough to try to comfort me.

I can tell by their breathing that Sasha and Kali are both asleep now, but I’ve given up. Every time I close my eyes, I see the dead Nazi painted inside my eyelids, which is too scary for sleeping. Sitting on my bunk with my back against the wall, like last night, it occurs to me that I’m the same Roza that I was last night, the same Roza I’ve ever been, but now I’m a killer, and that’s a strange idea, like I’m a little bit more evil, a little bit more powerful. I’m not sure how to think of myself. I keep imagining newspaper headlines.

SHARP SHOOTER ROZA SHANINA GUNS DOWN ENEMY OFFICER IN MOVING VEHICLE. ROZA SHANINA KILLS RUSSIAN BOY DISGUISED AS NAZI. KILLER ROZA SHANINA EXTERMINATES FELLOW HUMAN.

I hope killing a man doesn’t make me a horrible person. I hope the rules are different for soldiers. I think they must be, Yulia. We must kill the enemy. What choice do we have, as soldiers? I’m relieved that I was able to go through with it, so I don’t know where this confusion is coming from. Probably I’m just tired. Everything will be clear tomorrow.



---

#### 5.4.44, 4:12

Dreamt of Fyodor, just now. I was alone in a room with no windows or doors, nothing at all except for a box made of rough wood, a big square box, big enough to hold something important,



or nothing at all. I wondered if it held the man I shot, and looked at it, fearing it, and then I was inside the box, in total darkness, cramped, wood pressing into me all around, and it turned into a coffin. I couldn't move and I panicked, banging my head on the lid, calling for help, and then Fyodor was there, standing next to the box. I saw him from above, as if some part of me floated near the ceiling, while my body was still trapped in the coffin. He looked perfect, happy, smiling. I thought how handsome death had made him. My eyes took him in eagerly, until I saw the giant hole in his chest, and I understood that it was I who had shot him, I who had killed him, and I was horrified. *Fedya, forgive me*, I cried, but no sound came out. *Fyodor!* I screamed, still no sound. Then we were in the box together, and it wasn't small, we both fit fine. He wrapped himself around me, holding me, and my terror slid away, replaced by a feeling of total safety. I woke up just now. What do you think it means, Yulia? I want to believe that Fyodor is watching over me, that he didn't end with his death.



---

#### 5.4.44, 22:12

#### On my bunk, sniper quarters

We had the day off today so not much action. It's been a long time since I've had a whole day without drills or orders. You'd think *burrah!* but today seemed a week long, with far too much time to think about the Nazi I shot yesterday, and to re-examine Sergei's letter. I'm going to make myself mental wondering what on earth to do about that letter. I wandered around the woods all morning, brooding about how to get it to Papa, and came to the conclusion that I have no way of doing this. I'm determined to put it out of