

WHAT THE blitzkrieg DID TO ME

by Rose Mary Langer



To be a war veteran has always been a special mark of distinction. Today millions of men, women, and children of Europe are war veterans just as surely as is any soldier who has served in the front line. They have been through the hell of battles as terrifying and as bloody as any clash of armed forces. All the old foundations of life, as they knew it, have been demolished, and today they find themselves in a new and vastly changed world. Just what that world is like is described here vividly by one of them—a war refugee who, with her husband, is starting life anew in America.—The Editor.



I AM one of those millions of European people—men, women, and children—who are *blitzkrieg* veterans.

I was in Warsaw during the siege a year ago. Day and night, for weeks, I listened to the whine of artillery shells, the roar of diving planes, the terrifying explosions of bombs.

I was in my house when it was hit by a bomb.

In mad panic I ran through streets that were a sea of flames, dragging by the hand my two children, aged eight and three. I have seen wounded and dead. I lost many of my friends and all my belongings. I was a refugee. And for months I have suffered hunger and cold.

And now I am in America, back to normal life, walking through streets unscarred by bombs and artillery fire, eating all I want to, working, visiting friends, going to the movies, laughing. . . .

People sometimes wonder that I can still laugh and have fun. The reason is simple: After the bombing was over we were all too busy to become morbid. There were so many things to be done at once! Food had to be hunted for (during the siege we at least had killed horses to eat, but afterward even this food vanished); water had to be pumped and carried, sometimes for a mile; debris waited to be cleared; gaping windows had to be stuffed with paper and rags to prevent the wind from freezing us to death. We worked and slaved from dawn to dusk, never stopping to consider the horrors we had been through.

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So, I can still laugh. Nevertheless, I do feel the effect of war. I look upon the world with new eyes and all my standards of value are changed. One who has undergone the dreadful ordeal of modern *blitzkrieg* can never be the same again.

War means facing death. I can still see myself pressed against the wall, holding the children tight, and waiting . . . waiting for the bomb to crash. The house is shaking with explosions, and the terrific roar of the diving planes comes directly from the sky over our heads. Will they drop it now? . . . No. . . . The roar is subsiding. . . . Another crash. The tinkle of broken glass, and a new wave of shrieking bombers over the house. Now? . . . And thus for hours, hours that seemed ages.

I learned then what mortal fear means. Yet, having been through it, I shall be forever grateful that I am alive. Before the war I used to take my right to live for granted, and often I did not think very highly of it, for life brings so much disappointment, misery, and pain. Not until I faced death did I realize that life, any life, is a wonderful gift.

War has also fundamentally changed my attitude toward death. I had always considered death as the supreme injustice nature inflicts upon us. I hated to think or talk about it. But now, since I have seen so many dead (I thought I could never get used to the sight, but I did), since I, myself, have expected to die within the next few minutes, death no longer seems unnatural to me. I got used to it. Today I know that I shall die, that my husband, my children, my friends, everybody I know and love, must die some day. And, strangely, this realization does not (*Continued on page 79*) bother me now. I had thought that such awareness of death must spoil the fun of living, and I am surprised to discover that it does not.

War is a merciless debunker. I have seen a man—and he was a judge, of all things—knocking with his suitcase on the heads of women and children while he tried to escape from a shelter that was set afire. His face was twisted and there was murder in his eyes. But I have also seen, in another shelter, a shy, meek girl going quietly about her business, talking to children, preparing food for others.

You can pretend to be this, that, or another thing, and get away with it. But no pretense will ever stand the supreme test of mortal danger. When bombs are crashing and fires raging, people are exactly what they are.

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THEN, there is another thing. For days and weeks I went about so hungry that I felt like crying every time I got up from a meager meal, knowing that I could eat five times as much and still not have enough. I slept on benches, on the floor, on the staircase. Such privations have made me certainly more appreciative of small comforts which in peacetime are usually referred to as "bare essentials." Why, a square meal, a clean bed, a bath are not "essentials" at all! They are not to be taken for granted but appreciated as wonderful gifts from the gods!

On the other hand, I have learned that these comforts, or "essentials," have nothing to do with happiness or unhappiness. I loved Warsaw, and I've seen it demolished. When, after those two last days of savage bombing and roaring fires, I went into the streets, I could not recognize the city, the city where I was born, where I have lived most of my life. It was then that I lost my faith in the value of material things. And when, a few hours later, I discovered that all my belongings were burned, too, I could not even feel sorry. After all, I had expected we would lose our lives, and we lost only our property! It looked like a good bargain, and it still does.

Today, in the United States, I do not envy my friends their lovely homes. All material things have acquired in my eyes a strangely perishable aspect that seems to rob them of half their attraction.

Perhaps that is one reason why I have been made to feel so much at home in the United States, which, with all its material progress, has shielded and nourished its faith in simple, imperishable things.

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