

# A German Son's Redemption

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Dr. Bernd Wollschlaeger, MD, grew up in Bamberg, Germany, in the 1960s as the son of a decorated German officer. But until he was spurred to investigate his family history on his own, the history of the Holocaust and his father's dark past was totally concealed from him. His quest for truth led him to *Eretz Yisrael* – and ultimately to become a Jew.

Until age 46, he tried to bury his past, fit in and simply live as a regular Jew. But in 2004, when his son asked, "מי הסבא שלי"—Who is my grandfather?" he knew he had to tell him the truth. He did not realize, however, that the story would become such a sensation.

*Zman* shares his unique and inspiring story.

The *Wehrmacht* tank officer awoke, still exhausted, on that frigid Russian morning, October 3, 1941. Amphetamine tablets had helped him to stay awake for the three days since the last briefing with the general, but over the night, fatigue had finally caught up with him. As he slowly awoke, he began to realize that he had spent all night in the turret of the tank. His legs were stiff and his hands nearly frozen. He felt the tank's cold metal through the thick material of the uniform he had worn for so many days.

"Where am I?" was his first thought, as he opened his heavy eyelids. His mighty Tiger tank, the pride of the German tank force, rested on top of a hill overlooking the town of Orel, on the Oka River, in western Russia.

As he struggled to clear his mind, he felt the physical and mental strain of the last few months. Since June 22, 1941, the German military had pushed eastward in their all-out attempt to conquer Russia. With victory now in sight, the conquest of the town below them had taken on great strategic importance. Orel stretched along both banks of the river, just a few hundred miles from Moscow.

The same cold weather facing them had once defeated the mighty Napoleon. Days were already getting shorter and colder, and these signs of oncoming winter urged him into action. The officer had studied at the National Political Institutes of Education (Napola), special schools to raise the new generation of leadership for the Nazi regime. There he learned that taking action for the Fatherland was a definitive sign of courage. He was also taught that the welfare of the group should be the primary focus of attention and effort.

Fear was a weakness, he learned, and tears were for the feeble. He would be a warrior with an iron heart.

The blood of his ancestors nourished his heart. His grandfather had fought in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 against France. His father sustained serious injuries in the First World



Leading Nazi tank ace, Captain Michael Wittmann, briefs his tank commanders in Normandy, 1944.

War, crawling out of France's blood-filled trenches. He was the progeny of warriors, an officer of the mighty German *Wehrmacht*, a young soldier ready and willing to unleash the power of his iron war machine. It was time to act!

In the early daylight, he could survey the position his tank had assumed the night before. He turned his head toward a group of trees on the smooth slope of a hill about 400 yards away. What he saw, nestled among the crown of trees near the bottom of the slope, sent chills down his spine. The powerful 76-mm gun of a Russian T-34 tank was pointing straight at him. "They must still be asleep," he mumbled in his frozen beard. He pushed at his weapons officer with his leather boot; a loud gurgle and a curse told him that Heinz was waking up.

"Heinz," he hissed, "get ready for battle." He felt the invigorating thrill of the hunt. Every inch of his stiff body was now flooded with adrenaline. Today is the day. Today we will conquer Orel, and this is how it will begin. This is my chance to serve Germany.

"Fire," he heard himself scream, tearing apart the frozen outer layer of skin on his dry lips. Seconds later, the explosion of the



The German Tiger tank was one of the most feared weapons of WWII. Here: A burned-out German tank in Cologne, Germany.

Russian tank temporarily blinded him as a direct hit ignited the ammunition on board and incinerated everyone within.

By the end of that cold October day, the town of Orel surrendered to the German tank units. Senior Lieutenant Arthur Reinhardt Wollschlaeger commanded the first Tiger tank in the attack on the last line of defense around the town.

His prestigious Knight's Cross assured, he crossed the bridge over the Oka River. Today Orel, he thought, tomorrow Moscow. Victory for Germany seemed all but assured to the man who would come to be the father of Bernd Wollschlaeger.

## Ramallah, 1988

The gray Israeli army bus rumbled along the pot-holed road that led to the army camp. It was early in the morning, and daylight was beginning to light the rolling hills and orchards of olive trees on the slopes above. The bus passed an old man standing on the side of the road, smoking a cigarette and wearing a *keffiyeh*, the traditional headdress of Arab men. He might have been a local farmer, his dried and wrinkled

skin tightly wrapped around prominent cheekbones. His eyes were dark, staring at the soldiers with a mixture of hostility and resignation.

He looked straight at the new medical officer, Bernd "Dov" Wollschlaeger. Their eyes met only for a fleeting moment, but long enough for Wollschlaeger to remember that man. He was sitting at one of the windows, which were covered with iron bars, feeling uneasy in the cage-like vehicle. His new army uniform was covered with a layer of fine dust, which turned his green fatigues dirty brown. He clumsily held his M-16, which he had received only the week before, its cartridge filled with bullets. He was holding it with both hands, trying to keep it pointed at the ceiling of the bus. During countless drills, the new soldiers had been instructed about the use of rifles. Once they crossed the Green Line, the sergeant ordered them to insert the cartridge. The Intifada, or Arab uprising, had begun just that month, and they had been cautioned about stone-throwing teenagers and militant Fatah members who might assault military vehicles.

Despite these looming dangers, Wollschlaeger felt comfortable in the company of the almost 40 other men—new immigrants from all over the world, drafted like him. He felt a mixture of tension and relief, almost like



Panoramic view of Ramallah, in the West Bank.