**The Bear Soldier: Inspired by the True Story of Wojtek, the Polish War Bear**

**ERIC KELLER**

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This is a work of historical fiction. While it draws inspiration from real events and the true story of Wojtek, the Polish soldier bear, certain characters, places, incidents, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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For my family, April, Kannon, and Avry, my greatest inspiration. And for Stillwater, Oklahoma, the home that gave me the strength to tell this story.

"The vice of history closing on Poland once again, as it had so many times before."

**AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The story you are about to read draws its inspiration from one of World War II's most extraordinary and heartwarming tales: Wojtek, a Syrian brown bear who served alongside Polish soldiers during some of the conflict's most brutal campaigns. Wojtek was not merely a mascot, but a full-fledged member of the Polish II Corps, officially enlisted with his own rank and paybook.

Discovered as an orphaned cub in Iran in 1942, Wojtek was raised by Polish soldiers who had endured the unimaginable hardships of Soviet deportation and imprisonment. As the bear grew, so did his bond with these men who had lost everything -- their homeland, their families, their sense of belonging. In Wojtek, they found not just a companion, but a symbol of resilience and hope.

While this novel is rooted in historical fact, the character of Piotr Prendys and his personal journey represent the composite experiences of many Polish soldiers. Through Piotr's eyes, I have attempted to honor not only Wojtek's remarkable story but also the courage, sacrifice, and enduring spirit of the Polish forces who fought so valiantly for freedom.

The Poland that these soldiers knew was erased from the map, first by Nazi invasion, then by Soviet occupation. Many, like the fictional Piotr, could never return home. Their story is one of loss, but also of finding family in the most unlikely places and of the profound bonds that can form between human and animal in times of greatest need.

This book is dedicated to their memory, to Wojtek's legacy, and to the enduring power of companionship in our darkest hours.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Chapter 1: Ashes of Home……………………………..1

Chapter 2: Exodus from Hell………………………….12

Chapter 3: The Mountain Cub………………………….23

Chapter 4: The Transfer……………………………..34

Chapter 5: Growing Pains…………………………….45

Chapter 6: The Underwear Incident…………………….56

Chapter 7: Desert Days………………………………67

Chapter 8: The Enlistment……………………………78

Chapter 9: Seas of Change……………………………89

Chapter 10: Terra Italia……………………………100

Chapter 11: Shadows of War………………………….111

Chapter 12: Thunder in the Mountains…………………122

Chapter 13: The Carrier…………………………….133

Chapter 14: Through Fire and Steel…………………..144

Chapter 15: Victory and Wounds………………………155

Chapter 16: The Promotion…………………………..166

Chapter 17: Summer Campaigns………………………..177

Chapter 18: Bitter Victory………………………….188

Chapter 19: Uncertain Future………………………..199

Chapter 20: Journey to Scotland……………………..210

Chapter 21: Winfield Camp…………………………..221

Chapter 22: Decisions………………………………232

Chapter 23: The Farewell……………………………243

**CHAPTER 1**

**ASHES OF HOME**

Rural Poland near Lwów, September 1939

The last potatoes of summer bent Piotr Prendys low to the earth. He worked quickly along the row, calloused hands breaking through black soil to expose pale treasures beneath. Each tuber promised food for winter, seed for spring. His father always said a man could weather any storm with potatoes in his cellar and faith in his heart.

Behind him, the white Prendys farmhouse stood against rolling green hills, smoke rising from the chimney where his mother prepared the midday meal. September had blessed them with clear skies and a generous harvest. The war that haunted anxious conversations at church seemed distant, a storm on someone else's horizon.

Piotr straightened to ease his aching back. At twenty-three, his body was strong, hardened by farm work since boyhood. He wiped sweat from his brow and gazed eastward. That's when he saw it: a smudge of darkness against blue sky. Not clouds. Smoke.

Something twisted in his gut, the same primal instinct that warns animals of approaching danger.

"Ojciec!" Piotr called, dropping his sack of potatoes. "Father!"

Tadeusz Prendys emerged from the barn, squinting toward his son's outstretched arm. The older man's face hardened.

"Get your mother and sisters," he said, voice steady but urgent. "Now."

Piotr ran. As he crested the small hill separating the potato field from the farmhouse, the eastern horizon revealed more smoke columns—three, five, seven of them rising from neighboring farms.

Halfway to the house, he heard it: a low mechanical growl alien to these peaceful fields. His legs froze as the first tank appeared on the main road, its metal body painted forest green with a red star on its side. Behind came more, a column of steel monsters crushing roadside flowers beneath their treads.

*Russians.*

Impossible. The Germans had invaded from the west just weeks ago. The Polish Army had mobilized to fight them. But from the east? The Russians were supposed to be neutral.

Piotr's paralysis broke when he saw his youngest sister, Aniela, just ten years old, step onto the front porch. She stood transfixed by the approaching column, a doll clutched in her small hand.

"Aniela! Inside!" he screamed, finding his voice as he sprinted toward her.

The girl disappeared through the doorway just as Piotr reached the house. Inside, chaos had erupted. His mother gathered food into a sack while his middle sister, Zofia, tried to calm the crying Aniela. His eldest sister, Helena, emerged from the back room with blankets and warm clothes.

"Where is Father?" his mother demanded, her movements precise despite the panic in her eyes.

"Coming from the barn," Piotr answered, moving to the window facing the road. The tanks were closer now, and behind them came trucks filled with soldiers. "We need to go."

"Go where?" Helena asked, her voice breaking.

Piotr had no answer. The Germans to the west, the Russians to the east. The vice of history closing on Poland once again, as it had so many times before.

His father burst through the door, rifle in hand.

"To the cellar," Tadeusz said. "Quickly."

"The rifle," Piotr's mother whispered. "Tadeusz, they will kill you if they find it."

The old man's face was stone. "Then they won't find it." He handed the weapon to Piotr. "Hide this beneath the floorboards in the cellar, under the preserves."

Piotr took the rifle, its weight familiar in his hands. He had learned to shoot it when he was twelve, his father teaching him to hunt deer that sometimes raided their crops. Never had he imagined using it against men.

They had just reached the cellar door when the first shots rang out. Not the heavy artillery of tanks, but the sharp crack of rifles. Screams followed, human voices rising in terror and pain from the direction of the Kowalski farm down the road.

Aniela began to sob. Zofia clutched her close, whispering prayers into her hair. Helena stood rigid, her face pale as milk. Piotr's mother made the sign of the cross.

"Go," Tadeusz urged them, his voice low. "I will watch from upstairs and come to you."

"No," Piotr's mother said, gripping her husband's arm. "We stay together."

For a moment, Tadeusz's mask of strength cracked, revealing fear beneath. He nodded once and followed them down the narrow stairs into the earth, pulling the cellar door closed behind them.

The darkness was complete until Helena lit a small lantern. Its glow revealed shelves laden with summer's preserves: jars of pickled vegetables, dried mushrooms, salted pork. The bounty meant to see them through winter now seemed meager protection against what approached.

Piotr worked quickly to pry up the loose floorboard his father indicated. He wrapped the rifle in an old cloth and laid it in the hollow space beneath, then replaced the board. As he did, the thunder of engines grew louder. The Russians had reached their farm.

The family huddled together in silence, straining to hear what happened above. Heavy boots stomped across the porch. The front door splintered with a crack that made Aniela whimper. Shouts in Russian, commanding and harsh.

The sound of destruction followed: furniture overturned, glass breaking, the methodical ransacking of a life built over generations.

"They're looking for food and valuables," Tadeusz whispered. "Let them take it. All that matters is we are together."

Minutes stretched into an hour. The noise above continued, punctuated by occasional laughter that chilled Piotr more than the shouting.

Then came the sound they had all been dreading: boots on the cellar door.

Tadeusz moved to the base of the stairs, placing himself between his family and whoever would come down. Piotr stood beside him, reaching for a rusted shovel that leaned against the wall. His mother pulled the girls deeper into the shadows.

The door crashed open. Sunlight blinded them momentarily. Then a Russian soldier appeared at the top of the stairs, rifle aimed down.

"Vykhodi!" he shouted. *Come out.*

Tadeusz raised his hands slowly. "We are just farmers," he said in Polish. "We have no weapons."

The soldier barked orders over his shoulder, and more men appeared. One descended the stairs, roughly pushing Tadeusz aside to inspect the cellar. When he discovered the preserves, he called out excitedly. Within minutes, the shelves were being emptied, jars passed up the stairs into waiting hands.

More soldiers entered, herding the family up and out of their sanctuary. In the farmyard, Piotr blinked against the harsh sunlight. What he saw made his heart stop.

Their neighbors, the Kowalskis, the Nowaks, the Dabrowskis, all stood in a ragged line, guarded by soldiers. Some were bloody, all terrified. Old Kowalski was on his knees, begging in broken Russian as a soldier held a pistol to his wife's head.

An officer approached the Prendys family. Unlike his men, he wore a clean uniform and spoke with educated precision.

"Poland is now under the protection of the Soviet Union," he announced in accented Polish. "You will be relocated to worker settlements in the east, where you will contribute to the glory of the Soviet state."

"This is our home," Tadeusz said quietly. "Our land. For generations..."

The officer's hand cracked across Tadeusz's face. "This land belongs to the people now, not to kulaks who hoard its wealth." He turned to his men. "Search them for valuables."

Rough hands patted them down, taking Piotr's mother's wedding ring, Helena's small silver cross. When they reached Aniela and tried to take her doll, she began to scream. The soldier raised his hand to strike her, but Piotr lunged forward.

"No!"

The rifle butt caught him in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs. He collapsed to his knees, gasping.

"Piotr!" His mother's cry was cut short as another soldier grabbed her arm.

Through tears of pain, Piotr watched as his family was separated: his father and he pushed toward a truck filled with other men, his mother and sisters toward another vehicle with women and children.

"Mama!" Aniela screamed, reaching back as a soldier shoved her forward.

Tadeusz struggled against his captors. "Where are you taking them? My family..."

A rifle stock silenced him, blood blooming on his temple as he crumpled to the ground.

"Father!" Piotr fought to reach him, but strong hands restrained him.

"He lives," the officer said coldly. "For now. His fate, and yours, depends on your cooperation."

They were loaded into trucks like cattle. The last Piotr saw of his home was the farmhouse in flames, black smoke rising to stain the perfect blue of the September sky. A fox slipped from the burning barn and paused, watching the chaos with the same bewildered terror that Piotr felt. For a moment, their eyes met, two creatures whose worlds had just been destroyed.

The last he saw of his family was his mother's face, tear-streaked but determined, mouthing words he couldn't hear but understood: *Be strong. Survive.*

Words he would one day repeat to another orphaned soul.

**Soviet Labor Camp, Siberia, Winter 1941**

The dead man's boots might fit him.

Piotr eyed them as the guards dragged the body past, leaving a dark trail in the snow. Starvation, frostbite, or simply the giving up that claimed so many, it didn't matter what had killed the man. Only that he no longer needed his boots, while Piotr's leaked at the seams, letting in the deadly Siberian cold with each step.

He would wait until nightfall to search for the corpse in the mass grave beyond the camp fence. Being caught outside after curfew meant a bullet or worse, the isolation cells where men went in standing and came out carried by others, if they came out at all. But the alternative was to watch his own toes blacken and die, one by one.

Two years in the labor camp had taught Piotr the brutal calculus of survival. What could be traded for food. How much strength to spend each day, saving just enough to wake the next morning. Which guards could be bribed, which avoided at all costs.

His father had not survived the first winter. Tadeusz Prendys, who had weathered sixty-three Polish winters on his own land, had succumbed to pneumonia within months of arriving at the camp. Piotr had held him as he died, his once-powerful body reduced to skin stretched over bone, his last words a whispered question about his wife and daughters that Piotr couldn't answer.

Of his mother and sisters, Piotr knew nothing. Women and children had been sent to different camps. He clung to the hope that they were alive, that his mother's fierce practicality, Helena's quiet strength, Zofia's resourcefulness, and Aniela's innocence had somehow preserved them. But hope, like everything else in the camp, had become a scarce commodity.

Piotr shuffled forward in the food line, clutching his bowl with fingers made clumsy by cold and malnourishment. The smell of thin cabbage soup made his stomach clench painfully. One meal a day, barely enough to keep a man alive, certainly not enough to sustain twelve-hour shifts in the lumber camp where prisoners felled trees in temperatures that froze the breath in their lungs.

"Move, Polish dog," the guard snapped, shoving Piotr forward as the line stalled.

Piotr stumbled but kept his footing. Falling meant spilling his soup, and spilling his soup meant not eating. Not eating, even for a day, could be the difference between life and death.

The man in front of him, a professor from Warsaw who had once lectured on literature at university, received his portion and stepped aside. When Piotr's turn came, the server (another prisoner, a Ukrainian with a face like crumpled paper) ladled a watery scoop into his bowl. Piotr's eyes caught his, a moment of silent communion between the condemned.

Finding a place against the barracks wall where the bitter wind was partially blocked, Piotr ate slowly, savoring each mouthful. He had learned not to gulp his food down, no matter how his body screamed for it. Eating too quickly led to cramps, and there were no breaks during work shifts for a man doubled over in pain.

"Prendys."

Piotr looked up to see Kazimierz Wójcik limping toward him. Kazik had been a lawyer in Kraków before the war, his once-elegant hands now gnarled from frostbite and labor. The two men had formed an alliance of necessity in their first months at the camp, watching each other's backs, sharing what little they had. In this place, such friendships were both dangerous (attachment meant vulnerability) and essential for survival.

"They found your stash," Kazik murmured, settling beside him with a grunt of pain. "The extra bread under your mattress. Borowski took it."

Piotr closed his eyes briefly. Three days he had gone hungry to save those crusts, planning to eat them before tomorrow's double shift at the lumber mill.

"Did they report it?"

"No. Just took it. Borowski was hungry too."

Small mercies. Had the guards discovered his hoarding, the punishment would have been severe.

"There's news," Kazik continued, his voice dropping so low that Piotr had to lean closer to hear. "The guards were talking. Germany has invaded Russia."

The world tilted beneath Piotr. "When?"

"June. They're calling it Operation Barbarossa. The Germans have pushed deep into Soviet territory."

"The enemy of my enemy," Piotr whispered, an old proverb surfacing from memory.

Kazik nodded, a spark in his hollow eyes that Piotr hadn't seen in months. "There's more. Stalin has agreed to release Polish prisoners to form an army. To fight the Germans."

Piotr stared at his friend, hardly daring to believe it. Freedom, after so long? "An army?" The word felt strange on his tongue, as if he were speaking a language long forgotten. "From this?" He gestured at his skeletal body, at the yard filled with men who could barely stand.

"They need soldiers," Kazik said. "And we need out of this hell."

For the first time in two years, Piotr felt something stir within him, not hope exactly, but its faint shadow. To leave this place, to hold a weapon instead of a saw, to fight rather than simply endure... And perhaps, eventually, to search for his family.

"When?" he asked.

"Soon. Days, maybe weeks. They're calling it Anders' Army, after the general who will command it." Kazik's hand, missing two fingers to frostbite, gripped Piotr's arm with surprising strength. "We must be ready. Build our strength. When they ask for volunteers, we must look like men who can fight, not walking corpses."

Piotr nodded slowly. "The dead man's boots. I was going to get them tonight."

"Too risky now. If you're caught and punished, you might miss the liberation." Kazik reached into his ragged coat and pulled out a small bundle wrapped in cloth. "Here. I saved half my bread."

Piotr stared at the offering. In the camp, no gift was greater. "Kazik, I can't..."

"You're stronger than me. Younger. If either of us has a chance to fight, to maybe see Poland again..." The older man pressed the bread into Piotr's hand. "Take it. Live. Remember."

Tears froze on Piotr's cheeks as he accepted the gift. "We will both live," he said. "We will both go home."

In the distance, a wolf howled, a sound rarely heard so close to the camp. The prisoners and even the guards paused, listening. There was something primal in that call, something that spoke to the wilderness in all men, a reminder that beyond these fences, beyond human cruelty, nature continued its ancient rhythms.

That night, as other prisoners snored and whimpered in fitful sleep, Piotr lay awake on his hard bunk, one hand curled around Kazik's gift beneath his thin blanket. Outside, the Siberian stars glittered like ice crystals in the black sky. Somewhere beneath those same stars, his mother and sisters might be looking up, might be receiving the same news of liberation.

*Be strong. Survive.* His mother's last words echoed in his memory.

For the first time in two years, Piotr allowed himself to imagine a future beyond the camp fence, beyond mere survival. He thought of home, of Poland's green fields and forests. He thought of his family being reunited. He thought of justice.

And in the darkest hour of the Siberian night, Piotr Prendys made a promise to himself, to his dead father, to his missing family, to the thousands of Polish prisoners suffering in Soviet camps across this frozen wasteland: he would live to see his homeland again, and he would never again be powerless to protect those he loved.

He did not know then that this promise would eventually extend to a small, orphaned bear cub, whose fate would become entwined with his own in ways he could never imagine.