

The following is based on a true story ...

... which means, in reality, almost none of it transpired as described here.



The Orzel Incident

Historical Fiction

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4 September 1939

The waves slapped hard against the hull of the ORP Orzel, her conning tower rolled slightly from side to side. Radioman Gerwarski climbed up the gangway and handed a message to the Captain. There was just barely enough space for two men to stand on the flying bridge of the submarine. The wind made it hard to keep the paper down so the Captain could read it. Every time he pushed the paper down the wind tore it out of his right hand and flopped it over his left.

“Captain,” the radioman announced, “Fleet informs us Gdansk has fallen to the Germans. They believe the Schleswig-Holstein will not be leaving port any time soon.”

“So, our current mission to sink her if she leaves Gdansk is pointless,” The Captain hollered over the roar of the wind. He finally got the paper into both his hands and it read exactly as the Radioman had described.

“They direct us to take station in the Baltic,” continued Gerwarski, “They expect our base in Oksywie will be occupied in a few hours. We are instructed to take whatever action we can against German shipping and then set a course for England.”

“Alright,” the Captain replied. Opening the cover on the communication tube, he yelled down to the control room, “Come to course three, four, zero. Engines ahead two thirds.”

“Aye, Captain,” came a voice from the tube, “coming to course three, four, zero.”

The ship lurched to the side, struggling as the waves broke over her bow.

“Engines at two thirds, Captain.” Came another voice. But the wind picked up as the sub came about and it almost couldn’t be heard. Captain Klockowski motioned with his hands for Gerwarski to go below and the tall radioman ducked his head below the railing, followed by the Captain.

Fortunately, the Dutch designers of the ship had placed portholes in the upper control room so the crew could see outside without having to expose themselves to poor weather. Captain Klockowski pulled a lever and the floor he had been standing on, rose into the ceiling, accompanied by a sound that seemed like steam was escaping from a hot iron. The moving floor locked into place in the ceiling, sealing like a hatch and reducing the noise to tolerable levels.

In the room was Lieutenant Jan Grudzinski, chief of the boat. “So, you’re not going into Gdansk to sink her?” the Lieutenant asked.

“We wouldn’t make it past the breakwaters,” he remarked, “If the Germans have the port, that means they control the fort’s coast batteries. Besides fleet has ordered us to England.”

“Four days into the war,” Jan declared dejected, “and the Polish Navy has already been defeated without firing a shot.”

“I told Skladkowski myself,” The Captain winked sarcastically, “We should have given the corridor back to the Germans. I would have saved us the cost of a navy.”

The young Lieutenant smiled. But inside he hoped the war would be over soon, now the German’s had what they wanted. But deep down, he knew that was a forlorn hope. The Germans had a greed for the better half of Europe ... and not much consideration for anyone who just happened to live on the ground they so intensely coveted.

“Keep a good lookout,” the Captain instructed.

“It’s hard to see much through these portholes,” the Lieutenant announced.

“Never the less,” Klockowski reminded him proudly, “Were hunting Germans now, only they will also be hunting us. Besides you can’t see much more up there.” He pointed at the ceiling.

“Lighthouse on our port side,” a lookout announced.

“Take a good look,” the Captain slapped the lookout seamen on the shoulder, “this may be your last sight of a free Poland for a while.”

Klockowski turned to his boat chief, “Ironic, isn’t it?” He asked.

“What is?” Grudzinski replied.

“The village where that lighthouse is,” the Captain pointed to a low rise of buildings below the bright light of the tower. “That village is called Hel. Hel, Poland. We’re about to embark on a voyage to England through a gauntlet of Germans by way of Hel.”

“Captain,” came a voice from the hatch below, “sonar is picking up two ships on our port, bearing three, two, zero.”

Both the Captain and his chief grabbed binoculars out of a metal cabinet on the hull and scanned the horizon along with the lookout. Only the rolling waves with the crashing white tops of the sea were evident. At last the lookout pointed to the left, “Two masts to port.”

“Are they ours?” The Lieutenant asked. “Two of our little birdies?”

The Lieutenant was referring to the Polish nickname for its minesweepers; ptaszki, for the Jaskółka class ships, were named after a different species of non-raptor birds. “Maybe the Mewa and the Żuraw,” he exclaimed hopefully. The captained craned his neck to get a better look.

Suddenly a shell ripped through the room diagonally, exiting out the side of the control tower, taking most of the body of the lookout with it. It hadn’t exploded, maybe because the hull of the submarine was too thin to set off the exploder, but that didn’t matter. Enough of those holes in the hull and the boat would be taking an express ride to the bottom of the Baltic.

The Captain looked at his chief, “I think that answers your question.”

The two looked at each other and in unison replied, "Germans."

Without any further words, the captain dropped down the hole of the floor hatch, followed swiftly by the Lieutenant. As Captain Klockowski pulled down on a line holding pulling the hatch down, Lieutenant Grudzinski spun the wheel, sealing the hatch closed. The Captain was partially prone, yanking on the rope, using all his weight to ensure good closure on the hatch.

"Emergency, dive," Ordered the Captain.

"Emergency dive," repeated the chief officer of the watch, "take us down, Mr. Stachura. Depth Captain?"

"Give me periscope depth if you please," he replied, regaining his feet after the hatch was closed.

"Up periscope," shouted the watch officer.

"Aye, sir, up periscope," came the echoed response.

An explosion rocked the ship, causing everything in the room to shake violently. Whatever the hull width, that shell had managed to go off.

"Damage Control report," the Captain yelled. As he waited for a response, he grabbed a chart from storage and unrolled it on the central table.

"Jaworski," he asked, "How deep can you get us?"

"In this part of the Baltic," the navigator replied, "only about 50 meters. Not deep enough to evade depth charges."

"Let's hope they don't have any," the Captain responded, "Helmsman, come to course three, two, zero."

"Aye, Captain, coming to course three, two, zero. Depth two five meters, sir."

The captain unfolded the handles on the periscope and looked for his assailants in the eyepiece. Another explosion rocked the boat, but this one was farther away. A miss.

"Are they destroyers sir?" inquired the helmsman. The tone of concern in his voice was all too clear. The Captain took it all in stride. This was a new ship and a new crew. You can't expect a veteran's reaction from a ship in its first time under fire. He just hoped they remembered to do their jobs.

"No," Captain Klockowski replied calmly, "they are too small ... that's how they snuck up on us so fast. They look like minesweepers. Don't worry, Buse, if they were destroyers we'd all be dead by now," he responded cheerfully.

"They must have been waiting for us," remarked Grudzinski

"Damage Control where is my report." The Captain shouted in a disturbed tone.

The boat rocked from another near miss. But this one was closer. If they get the range right it was going to be a very short patrol.

"Sonar," the captain called out, "get me a bearing on those two ships."

“Bearing zero, zero sir ... dead ahead.”

A head popped out of the forward hatch and one of the crew reported, “Torpedo room flooded. Everyone got out, but the room is flooded. The forward hatch is sealed and is holding, but all four tubes are inoperable.”

“Damn,” the Captain complained slapping the handles on the periscope closed, “give me course zero, nine, zero. Depth forty-five meters. Down periscope.”

“Aye, sir coming to course zero, nine, zero. Depth now passing three zero meters. Bow plane twenty degrees. Down periscope.”

“Are we running?” asked Lieutenant Grudzinski indigently.

“Do you expect me to fire sea water at them Lieutenant?” the Captain replied, “because that’s all I’ve got to shoot at them with. By the time we can surface to use the deck gun they’ll make the Orzel look like a piece of swiss cheese.” He thought for a moment, looking at the chart in the dim red light. “We’ll head east for a while and then circle back around and head for England to make repairs.”

He wasn’t too happy. About all he could say was they had avoided being sunk. It wasn’t going to make the heroic log entry he was hoping to write.



Everyone was sweating. Even though the diesel engines were off and they were running on batteries, the heat from the engines had nowhere to go except inside the hull. But the Captain looked like death warmed over. His face was white as ash and his lips had lost almost all their color.

“Where are they now sonar?” the Captain asked.

“Still following us sir.”

“They must have some kind of listening equipment,” Grudzinski proclaimed, “and the depth is shallowing out. We can’t stay down here forever. Can we come up and fire the stern tube?”

“If they are minesweepers, they go right under their hulls,” The Captain replied. He leaned over the chart table, scanning the paper for an escape route. His knees buckled and he slowly collapsed to the floor.

“Captain,” shouted Grudzinski as he reached down to bring the Captain to his feet, but Klockowski was unresponsive and lay on the floor of the sub, unconscious. “Corpsman,” Grudzinski bellowed. The wait seemed interminable, but at last, the crewman appeared carrying a bag.

Opening the Captain’s eye, he shined a light at the pupil, moved it away and then back to the eye again. No response. He leaned down and put his ear against the officer’s chest.

“Well, is it the heat?” inquired the chief.

"I don't know," he replied. He noticed the distress in the chief's face. "I'm not a doctor," he protested, "I put bandages on people's wounds and hand out aspirins ... it could be his appendix form all I know?"

"Alright," Grudzinski fumed, "get him back to his cabin. Jaworski, when is it dark?"

"In about an hour," The navigator responded.

"OK, shut down all the engines. Everybody we're going silent."

"But what about the Captain?" Buse yelled.

"Shut up," the Chief of the Boat replied, "Once it's dark, will put up the snorkel and turn the diesel engines back on."

"You going to go back to port?" Buse complained, "The Germans are there. You going to hand us all over to the Germans?"

Grudzinski shuffled the papers around on the table, staring at it as if looking for a sunken treasure. The crew waited, wondering what the chief had up his sleeve. "Hey, Stachura," he called out, "Even been to Estonia?"

"Estonia? No, why?"

"You know what is wrong with the Captain?"

"No."

"Neither do I. I don't think we want to wait to do something until we get to England. Do you? So we're going to pay a little visit to Tallinn."

"What about Riga, it's closer," complaining Buse.

"You want to go to Latvia? They have a pact with the Germans." Cried, Stachura. Technically it was just an understanding, but Stachura knew Buse never read that far in the papers. Everybody knew that the Latvians didn't like the Germans, but they hated the Russians. So, right now, the Nazi's were their buddies. He turned to Grudzinski.

"Chief Isn't Estonia a neutral country?" Stachura asked.

"You're in the navy, aren't you?" The chief asked, but without waiting for a reply he finished, "Well it's time to see the world, Stachura. I can't have you finishing this cruise without visiting Estonia, now can I?" he joked.

Everyone laughed, except for Buse ... who now looked more confused than ever.



The castle and tower dominated the skyline of Tallinn hove into view as the wounded Orzel crept into the port. They had successfully managed to evade the two German Minesweepers. Although Grudzinski didn't have a clue how they accomplished that. The best he could figure out was they'd been called away on another task. Or maybe, needed to refuel. But whatever the reason they were pulling into the capital city of Estonia. Standing on the ship's deck, the flag of the Polish republic flying from the extended radio antenna, Grudzinski was having second thoughts. Tallinn was a quaint, almost medieval town, it didn't look like a place that had up to date medical facilities. But there was no turning back now. They were committed.

A group of Estonians stood on the dock to meet them. A surprisingly modern-looking ambulance parked behind them. Grudzinski had radioed ahead explaining their captain was ill and need medical attention. As they pulled up to the jetty, two dockworkers caught the mooring lines. And helped pulled the boat into place, tying off the lines. The crew put up a short gangplank between the deck and the wharf and two men took the captain up this ramp to the ambulance. Grudzinski followed. He was met by two Estonian officials in civilian attire.

The shorter man had a flat face and eyes that peered through the narrow slits of his puffy eyelids. He looked every inch of the stony, bureaucratic office worker. A trade unionist to be sure. The type that didn't do anything for free ... and enjoyed upping the fee if you were in a hurry. The taller man reminded Grudzinski of his uncle, who was a wrestler. He stuck close to the smaller man as if acting as his bodyguard.

"Lieutenant Jan Grudzinski of the Polish Navy," He announced himself, "Thanks for your help. Sorry to cause you any trouble."

"What?" Asked the smaller of the two men in a tone of fake surprise, "It's no trouble at all. We're happy to help out." He smiled in a friendly fashion as he took the Lieutenant's hand and shook it warmly.

"Unfortunately, we can't leave right away. Our ship has been damaged." Grudzinski reported. "As you might be aware we're having a temporary disagreement with the Germans. Under the Hague Convention of 1907, Section Thirteen, Article Twelve, I am officially requesting your permission for a stay in your neutral port for twenty-four hours to make as many repairs as possible before putting out to sea again."

"Stay as long as you need to Lieutenant," stated the port official.

"But what about the Germans?" he asked.

"We won't tell them," the official smiled, "If you don't." The little man winked.

The two looked at each other, the Lieutenant looking a little lost, not knowing what to say next. There had never been a training class on how to work with foreign port officials. Behind him, the sub crew had already set up an external pump and was busy getting the water out from the forward torpedo room. Finally, the taller official broke the tension, "What can we do to help?"

"I could use a few more welting torches."

"I think we can do better than that," the little man replied. "This is Tallinn. We have some of the best welding crews in the world. Semyonov," he turned to the tall man behind him, "Let's get some of *our* crew on this."

"At once," he replied. He whistled and a number of dockworkers came running as the ambulance pulled out behind them.

"We'll have you fixed up in no time," the little man said.



Repairs went much better than Grudzinski expected. In only sixteen hours they had the holes patched and all the water drained out of the hull. The little official had been right, the Estonians did an excellent job. Although he was a little concerned about the size of the bill he would have to present to fleet ... if he ever got home.

He was busy inspecting the damage to the torpedo room equipment when a crewman entered, "You might want to see this Captain."

"What is it?"

"I think you should see for yourself."

Grudzinski followed him up to the deck, through the torpedo loading hatch. They opened it earlier to get more light down into the Torpedo room and to help dry things out. "What is it?" he started to ask when he noticed a group of about a dozen men in Estonian military uniforms. Most of them were carrying the new submachine gun the Finns were so proud of, but one was brandishing a pistol. They motioned for the crew to raise their hands. Grudzinski nodded and the crew's hands reluctantly went up in the air.

"What's the meaning of this," Grudzinski demanded, "I still have eight hours left."

"You in command of the vessel?" The man holding the pistol demanded.

"That depends. Can I take my arms down?" Grudzinski requested.

The officer nodded, and Grudzinski lowered his hands, "Lieutenant Jan Grudzinski in temporary command. Our captain was ill and has been taken to hospital. Under the Hague Convention of ..." He trailed off as the Estonian officer shook his head from side to side.

"I have my orders Lieutenant," the officer sighed, "The German ambassador was most distressed to see a submarine flying the Polish flag in the harbor this morning. He was not a forgiving man ... and if I might say so a pig. But the government doesn't want any trouble. We have enough of that with the Soviets crawling up our butts like a spider looking for a roost. You will surrender your ship. The crew will be interned here for the duration of the war. We'll try to make your stay here a comfortable one." He turned to one of his soldiers, "Corporal, get below and get the navigational equipment and the maps."

“Yes, sir,” the man saluted.

“You may remain aboard with your men until we get some trucks out here to take your men to some temporary quarters in the town. I have a room for you in the hotel. You’ll stay there with your other officers until they figure out what to do with you.”



Most of the crew just stood by as the guards began removing all the ship’s armaments. They emptied the weapons locker and carried off the anti-aircraft rounds for the rear gun. Grudzinski stood by, watching from the conning tower as the Estonian dockworkers started removing the torpedoes, from the forward torpedo room.

“Are you just going to let them do this?” Buse asked.

“Have you got a machine gun hidden in your shirt that I don’t know about?” Grudzinski replied.

“No.” answered Buse, annoyed.

“Well I don’t think we have much choice at the moment, do you?”

“Estonians are shameless pigs and their mothers are rotten whores,” Stachura casually remarked in Polish.

“What are you talking about?” Grudzinski questioned the Diving Officer.

“I just wanted to see if any of our guards spoke Polish. I don’t think they do,” he explained. “Chief have you noticed what the Estonians are using to remove the torpedoes?”

“The compartment hoist cable. What of it, that’s what it’s for.”

“I’ve been looking at the chain,” Stachura suggested to the Lieutenant, “I don’t think it is holding up well under the strain. It might break at any moment.”

“What happens if the chain breaks,” Grudzinski turned to face the Dive Officer and inquired with a worried tone.

“Not much. The detonators have been removed.”

“I think I see what you mean Stachura. See to it at once.”

“Aye, aye, sir. One chain failure coming up.”

Grudzinski turned to Buse, “Get Gerwarski and ‘The Pigeon’ and release the mooring lines. Make sure they do it *slowly*. Just let the lines slip into the water. No splashes.”

“Right. No splashes.” Buse smiled at the Estonians who were watching.

“Jaworski, tell the engine room crew to get the electrical motors ready. Don’t use the diesel, it’ll be too noisy. We’ll close all the hatches once we get moving. Everybody goes when the chain breaks.”

The tension was so heavy you could cut it with a knife as the crew moved into position.

“What happens if this doesn’t work?” Buse asked.

“Well, that will solve the Estonians problems with where to keep us. Some of us will no doubt be staying in the Tallinn cemetery.” Grudzinski joked.

Buse didn’t look amused.

“Were at war Buse,” Grudzinski muttered, “did you think the worst thing that might happen to you is getting a cut on your finger?”

Grudzinski watched out of the corner of his eye as Stachura strode confidently over to the winch with a wrench in his hand. It looked for all practical purposes like he was going to tighten up a loose bolt or something. He swung the wrench right into the winch. Sparks flew as the electric motor squealed in protest. The chain gave way and the torpedo came crashing to the deck. It bounced off the deck, flying into the air a few inches and came off the chain entirely, rolling across the deck. Two Estonians jumped out of the way as the torpedo rolled off the deck and proceeded to fall into the ocean with a huge splash.

The Chief smiled; it was the perfect cover. No one was watching as the two mooring lines slid silently into the water. He leaned down and yelled into the hatch, “Now. Full speed astern.”

The boat lurched as the engines cut in. The Estonian guards on the deck all lost their balance and they slipped into the waters of the harbor as the engines drove the boat back from the jetty with a violent jerk. The Polish crew members on deck grabbed lines, railings, and ladders to hang on as the boat moved away from the wharf. One Estonian managed to reach a support spar with one hand. Until a Polish sailor stepped on his hand with a crunch. The man cried out as he fell into the water clutching his injured hand.

“Sorry about that,” the seamen called out to him sarcastically, “I didn’t see you there.”

The Estonian Officer yelled something from the dockside, but Grudzinski couldn’t quite make it out. He raised his pistol, pointing it in the Lieutenant’s direction. The sound of a bullet, bouncing off the hull near Grudzinski gave him the message clearly and it more than effectively relayed the officer’s displeasure.

The officer turned around and yelled something at the medieval castle that overlooked the port. He looked at it, but all he could see where old-fashioned muzzle-loading cannon. Grudzinski suddenly wondered what an old cannonball might do to a modern submarine.

Grudzinski saw flashes coming from the castle tower by the jetty. Machine gun bullets tore into the radio antenna behind him. The antenna snapped into two from the gun burst and Grudzinski watched as the metal pole broke off and the Polish flag went fluttering into the waters of Tallinn harbor.

“A little more alacrity if you please,” Grudzinski yelled down to the engine room. “I think we just wore out our welcome.”

The boat just managed to pull away from the jetty as the machine gun continued to rake the conning tower with fire from the tower. The crew managed to get all the hatches closed, the boat turned and they started heading out to sea.

“Sonar,” Grudzinski called out, “Any sign of pursuit?”

“No sir, it’s all quiet.”

“Stachura, take us down anyway, as soon as there is enough room in the harbor. Just in case.” He added.

The Chief heard the lapping of the waves as the boat desks slipped beneath the water.

“Are we going back for the Captain?” Jaworski asked tentatively.

“They didn’t like us very much sitting in their harbor. How do you think they’ll feel about a couple of Polish sailors walking around town looking to break someone out of a hospital?” Grudzinski replied. “We were lucky to get out back there, let’s not tempt fate.”

“A simple no would have sufficed.”

As the lights in the main control room changed to red, a crewman appeared in the front hatch. “Chief you’re wanted in the forward torpedo room.” Grudzinski rushed forward fearing one of the welds had failed and the room was flooding again.

What Grudzinski found was a dry room and two astonished looking Estonian guards still holding their submachine guns on the two torpedomen in the room. Both the Poles were holding their hands in the air. One of the guards directed his weapon at the Chief, “What going on?” He asked.

The Chief calmly took out a cigarette and lit the end with a lighter from his pocket. All the while the Estonian looked at him nervously. “We’re leaving. We’ve decided to decline your offer of a long-term stay.” Grudzinski advised them.

“You’re going to let us out,” the Estonian guard demanded as he hiked his weapon up higher, taking a bead on the Chief.

“Can you swim?” Grudzinski asked, taking a long puff and pulling the cigarette from his lips.

“What?” The guard asked astonished.

“I just asked if you could swim,” The Chief continued, taking another puff. “We should be about ... oh, thirty meters under water by now.”

“Take us up,” The Estonian demanded.

The Polish lieutenant shook his head, “I don’t think so,” he replied slowly, but noting the gun in the shaky guard’s hand he added, “Of course, you can shoot all of us. In that case, I hope you know how to operate a submarine. Otherwise, you’ll just join the crew at the bottom of the Baltic.”

The Estonian lowered his weapon and thought about that for a moment. He suddenly dropped the weapon and it fell to the deck with a loud clatter. “Must have slipped out of my hands,” he muttered.

One of the crewmen grabbed the weapon and trained the gun of the Estonian that was still armed. The two stared down at each other as the Chief continued to smoke calmly. Time seemed to drag on as Chief Grudzinski kept puffing away calmly. He was holding the fag in a two-fingered pincer, common to many middle European smokers who seem like they are OK with the smoke but are afraid to touch the cigarette. Finally, the second Estonian dropped his weapon to the ground, “damn armory boys,” he spat, “They always put too much greasy oil on these things. Stupid thing slipped right out of my hands.” He looked at the first Estonian and smiled.

“Well,” said Grudzinski, “Welcome aboard the ORP Orzel.”

“Sobinski,” he turned to one of the torpedomen, “How many fish do we have left?”

“Just five.”

“Five!” Grudzinski complained putting out the cigarette, “Well, let’s hope we don’t run into a German fleet.”

Suddenly a loud screech filled the cabin and everyone was thrown off their feet with a crash.

“They rammed us!” one of the torpedomen shouted.

“No,” said Grudzinski, “We’ve run aground.” He headed back towards the main control room, ducking through the hatches as he went. When he got to the room, the crew was huddled around the periscope.

“What happen?” the Chief demanded.

“Sandbar,” Jaworski the navigator reported, “We’re stuck.”

As if to punctuate the navigator's statement a whistle could be heard over the conning tower, followed by a loud boom. Stachura spun the periscope around back towards the harbor. “They’re shelling us from the fortress,” he reported.

One of the Estonian guards appeared behind the Chief, “I thought you said we were underwater?”

“I lied,” Grudzinski replied matter of factly, “You should have shot me.”

“He’s the worst liar in Poland,” Stachura informed the two Estonians as the crew rushed from one part of the room to the other, checking instruments and dials. “I wouldn’t believe him if he told me you were the King of Norway.”

Another shell could be heard flying over the top of the conning tower, followed by a rough explosion.

“But I’m not the King of Norway ... I’m not even Norwegian,” the Estonian remarked.

“See what I mean,” Stachura smiled, “worst lair in Poland.”

An explosion rocked the boat, throwing the two Estonians off their feet.

“They’re getting closer,” Buse announced.

“Blow the tanks,” Grudzinski ordered.

“What?” cried Buse, “Well float to the surface and that’ll just make us a bigger target.”

“Blow the tanks,” Grudzinski repeated firmly, “If we don’t get off this sand bar, we’ll be sitting ducks and they won’t have any trouble hitting us.”

“Blowing the tanks,” Stachura reported.

The boat shuttered and shook as the sub lifted itself off the sandbar. The crew grabbed for anything they could to hold steady. Another explosion hit the submarine and the entire boat shook violently. This time nobody kept their feet.

Returning to a standing position, Grudzinski yelled: “All engines full. Get the Diesel up and running ... I think they know we are here.” He smiled sarcastically, “Get me a damage control report.”

“Radio’s out,” Gerwarski replied.

“How do you know” asked Stachura.

“I was listening to the port’s radio traffic,” he explained, “It just went dead.”

“Great,” Chief Grudzinski replied, “what else can go wrong?”

“Engines full ahead,” someone called out, “Diesel engines engaged.”

The boat jumped forward over the sand bar, settling back down into the water with a bump. The submarine rocked from fore to aft, then settled out.

“Stachura, get us under.” Grudzinski insisted as another shell sailed overhead. “Get us under *now*.”

“Wait,” cried one of the Estonians in a panic, “let us out first.”

Another explosion shook the boat.

“You want to go out there while your pals are shooting at us?” Grudzinski asked.

The two Estonians looked at each other. “How fast can this thing so down?” one of them asked.

“Hopefully,” Grudzinski suggested, “just fast enough to avoid being sunk.”

As the cold waters of the Baltic closed over the deck of the Orzel Grudzinski hollered, “Secure the diesel.” He paused looking around the room. Everyone was calmly at their stations, performing their duties. The Orzel’s crew was no longer green. The Captain would have been proud. “Well, gentlemen, I’d say that Estonia is no longer neutral.”



The Orzel broke the surface of the water, as several of the crew scurried about on the deck, inflating a black rubber raft.

The Chief scanned the horizon with a pair of binoculars and having confirmed what he expected, he lowered them again. He turned to the two Estonians.

“Gentlemen, over there,” he said pointing at a low spit of land just a few hundred meters from the surfaced submarine, “is the island of Gotland, Sweden.”

“How do you know?” One of them asked, “We removed all of your charts and the compass.”

“I’ve been here before,” he replied, “This isn’t exactly my first cruise you know. I used to fish off that point with my father.” He pointed out a small angled bay along the coast of the island. The chief opened his hand. In his palm was a tiny compass, the kind you’d find in a cereal box. “I used to take this same compass with me when my father and I came here as a kid. He smiled, putting in his coat pocket.

Several of the Polish crew handed the two Estonians a pair of large packages, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with twine.

“What are these?” The Estonians asked perplexed.

“We got the radio working again ... well partially anyway. We can’t send, but we can receive.” Grudzinski explained as the Estonians looked at him quizzically, “we’ve been listening to the Estonian news out of Tallinn, they are reporting they sunk us. And two Estonian guards ... you two” he pointed at them like an officer picking them out of a lineup, “when down with the ship.”

The Estonians shrugged their shoulders.

“Those packages your hold,” Grudzinski explained to them, “they hold Buse’s and Stachura’s here best pair of civilian liberty clothes. They should fit you about right.” He smiled, “There is also a box in there. I had the mess attendant make you up some chow. It might be a long walk to get to a railway station so you can back home. Finally, there are about a thousand Zloti in there ... each.”

The Estonians looked at each other, shocked. It was more pay than they made in half a year.

“I don’t know what the exchange rate in Sweden is, but that should get you folks home in style,” Grudzinski announced. “Make sure you put the clothes on when you get ashore. We wouldn’t want the Swedes shooting you like an invading army.”

“Why?” The Estonians looked puzzled.

“The crew took a vote,” the young Polish Lieutenant explained, “Your own people reported you dead.” He let them comprehend that for a moment and then added, “We thought anyone returning from the underworld deserved to travel first class only.”

The crew finished inflating the rubber raft and sat the two Estonians down in it. They gave it a shove off the deck and it drifted into the Baltic.

“What are you going to do now?” One of the Estonians asked in a concerned voice.

“We’re going to sail off into the sunset,” Grudzinski replied.

“No, really,” the Estonian wondered.

“As I said into the sunset, we’re heading west. I have never been to Kiel. Should be nice this time of year ... with the German fleet in port and all. We’re going to do some real fishing.” He announced.

“You really are the worst lair in Poland,” the Estonian shouted back.

“Give my regards to your officer when you get back,” he yelled at them as they took up a pair of oars and started paddling for the coast.

As the boat drifted off across the sea, Jaworski leaned over to the Chief and whispered, “Are we going to Kiel?”

The boat’s engines started up again and the submarine headed off to the west. “Of course not, but they don’t need to know that. We have our orders. We’re going to England.”

“How will we tell them we coming? He can’t send on the wireless.”

“It wouldn’t help even if the wireless *was* working,” Grudzinski commented bluntly.

“Oh?”

“The Captain was the only one on board who spoke any English.” He grinned.

“Let’s just hope the Royal Navy is in a good mood. After that we will just have to trust to our luck, it worked for us so far.” Grudzinski smiled, “Let’s hope we haven’t used it all up.”