

Aaron's War

By Richard McMaster

Forward

Hollywood is great at making war seem so simple and straight forward, soldiers kill or are killed. And, it makes the watcher believe that people kill each other because they are told, because it is kill or be killed, the enemy is hated or whatever. We are left with the image that all soldiers fire at each other in a desperate attempt to hit and kill each other. According to research cited in the book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to*

Kill in War and Society, by Dave Grossman, only 15-20 percent of the soldiers fired at the enemy in WWII. And for soldiers who have an aversion to killing the PTSD effects are more profound. And, while studies have shown that the more time soldiers are in combat, the more likely they can become a psychiatric casualty

Aaron, the gentle soldier, is the son of Jewish immigrant parents. As his platoon fights their way into the heart of Germany, his religious conflicts grow. The cities he passes through feature magnificent churches and synagogues, German soldiers carry bibles and even wear belts engraved with the words, 'Gott Mit Uns'--*God with us*. Melding with his aversion to killing are thoughts of killing men who worship the same God as his fellow soldiers and searching for answers as to who his God is, and why his marriage to a Christian woman is forbidden.

Aaron, was given his name by his Jewish father and mother. Biblically, Aaron (Ahron) was the brother of Moses and the first High Priest. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, lays out the laws of Moses and fifteen times the Lord speaks to Moses and Aaron. Aaron was known for loving peace and pursuing peace. He is also an Islamic patriarch and the Quran refers to him as a prophet. The story of biblical Aaron resonates today as man overwhelms religion with interpretations or casts it aside.

I thought the character name was appropriate to one of the messages of the story about Aaron, the gentle soldier who was confused about his own religion in a war where Christians were killing Christians and Germans were attempting to eradicate the Jewish race.

The Journey from Home

Maybe is suspended by a thin thread high up between yes and no, the arbitrator of the two. Yes knows and no knows. Both can be wrong.

Maybe sees beyond the end of the stream, knowing it does not end, is always seeking its way home.

Maybe knows beyond the dark night that the sun can rise, and beyond the sunset a restful night.

Voyage of Life
Richard McMaster

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Aaron Vanko was a quiet, wavy-haired farm boy who lived with his Ukrainian parents near Ankeny, Saylor Township, an unincorporated area north of Des Moines, Iowa. His parents sold chickens and eggs to townsfolk and nearby restaurants. Eking out a living growing beans and corn, and raising cows and chickens made him farm strong. Well over six feet tall, he was the tallest and strongest boy in his school. Like his Woodside High classmates, totaling only seven boys and eight girls, he longed to leave his youth and step boldly into manhood.

Fritz, his best friend, was voted the most likely to succeed and Aaron, everyone teased, was destined for the priesthood. He was embarrassed by the talk, since his family never went to church. And, angry that his friends didn't think he would be a good soldier.

It was 1943, and war was uppermost in everyone's mind, on the streets and in homes, schools, markets and on the job. Late at night in hushed bedroom conversations, often just a few words ended the day, "Our boys are givin' 'em hell!" sometimes said with conviction and other times fear. There was no such talk on the Vanko farm. Talk of war was forbidden. Serious diner conversations was strictly limited to farming and schooling, not religion or war.

Whenever Aaron brought up anything about the war, his Bat'ko would always say, "War is for other people, not for us." Chewing his food over and over, as if he were gnawing on a grisly piece of meat, his father would grimace, "War settles nothing and is usually about nothing, except greed. Boys are just checkers in their little games."

Maty would lift her head and smile, "And, how was school today?" Asking about his schooling was always her way of changing the subject.

Whenever he asked Maty where they came from, who their relatives were, why they didn't go to church, she always scrunched up her face and with a wave of her hand dismissed him. He learned at an early age when Maty and Bat'ko waved the back of their hands in the air that was the end of the discussion. Sometimes, when she raised her open hand, she had no answers.

As Aaron matured, he learned having no answers to so many questions was a sign of her home smarts, and her gentle wisdom. On questions of religion, which Aaron asked about often, she would close her eyes and say in her broken English "Syn. What do we need of religion? We have God right here. Right here." She opened her eyes and gently held her hands out, her palms open. "Right here in this room."

Dinner conversations that veered into forbidden territory often ended abruptly, like falling off a cliff. Tonight was no different. Looking at Bat'ko, Aaron blurted out, "Fritz and Tony are enlisting."

Bat'ko didn't look up from his plate. He waved his hand dismissively.

"Why can't we ever talk about anything but school and farming? Everybody is joining the fight. Even the girls at school are asking who's gonna join and they all talk about going to work at the ordnance plant. We have to..."

Maty stopped chewing her food and squinted at Aaron, then cautiously back to Bat'ko. Bat'ko had set his jaw firmly in a scowl. "That's just big talk, boy talk. You're not a man. You

don't know. You do your talking out there with your friends, not at my dinner table." Bat'ko waved his hand toward the front door. "War is not good. Ever. Here we don't talk about war."

But that night after Aaron went to bed, when Samuel and Ida finished their prayers and rose up from their knees to climb into bed, Ida said, "You know Aaron will be drafted?"

Pulling the covers up tight under his neck, warming himself as the last logs he tossed on the fire were dying out, Samuel closed his eyes, and said in a hoarse whisper, "Never. I don't want to hear that."

Samuel Vanko, Aaron's Bat'ko, fled Ukraine with his parents when he was nine years old, after the Russian's destroyed Husiatyn, leaving behind his older brother, David, who had disappeared in the fire. They ran to avoid the soldiers, who conscripted able-bodied boys for the Russian war effort, killing or driving everyone else away from their land. Fire destroyed more than 600 buildings in the small town, and Jews were forcibly moved from the western borders of Russia towards the interior. About 100,000 exiles died of exposure or starvation, but those who didn't leave were raped and murdered. Local kids, openly forming anti-Semitic gangs, joined in to the sport of hunting down and murdering Jews.

The three refugees fled Ukraine for Czechoslovakia, where they were taken in by a Christian family. He left behind memories of horrors and loose ends, bearded old men and soldiers and fires, and tried to forget. He was a good student, and after his family moved to New York, he became a part of a close-knit Jewish community. Three years after celebrating his Bar Mitzvah, he was married to another refugee from his country, Ida Gottstein, in a match arranged by her aunt Batya. But he still couldn't find peace, or forget what he knew. Even in America he could see how Jews were treated - how they stayed to themselves, how the rabbis went along with segregation, cautious and passive. Bat'ko's father had hated the rabbis of Husiatyn for not fighting the Russians and now he had to deal with them in New York. Samuel wanted the promise of America, to raise a family as a family, but not as persecuted Jews, feeling as unsafe in New York as in his native Ukraine.

It wasn't that hard to hide. Samuel had studied hard, and over time, rarely spoke in his native Ukrainian tongue. He scolded Ida to learn better English and to not use Ukrainian words in front of Aaron. "Forget you were Ukrainian. Forget the past. Aaron will be an American. Remember how the Russians hated us. Let him be free of all of this."

Sleep was hard to find in the Vanko house that night. Lying awake as the fire faded, Ida waited, silent and still, bundled against the rising cold. Aaron tossed and turned in his bed just a few feet away, on the other side of the wall, Samuel and Ida stared into the darkness. Ida knew Samuel wasn't asleep because he hadn't started snoring. These days, snoring was a blessing, as welcome as summer storms in drought.

Samuel broke the silence. "We have him now."

Ida rolled over and placed her arm on his chest. "This is America. If he has to he will serve with honor. This is not like home where they steal fourteen-year-old boys for the Army even though they hate us."

"Yes, this is America. Still, they take young boys to fight their wars."

"Maybe it will be different. At least they don't steal them."

"I know David's dead. I know it in my heart. I still see him at night. It would have been kinder had they shot him." Samuel always said he would rather the town fight the Russians and die than to let them take their boys. "But maybe...."

"Bat'ko, this is not Russia."

Aaron listened to them murmuring, half hearing. He wanted to tell them he was going to enlist with his friends, soon. He wanted them to be proud. Watching the cold, fall sky through his window, he waited for sleep.

Friday night was unusually warm. Winter had bared its teeth early in November, but Iowa weather was as well known for its extremes as it was for corn. Cold, bitter winter with wind chill temperatures fifty below zero, and in summer over one hundred-degree sweaty days blanketed nights of hunting for sleep lying in a pool of your own sweat. Hourly swings were not a surprise to Iowans when late fall days played tug of war with winter ones.

“Let’s go fishing. It’s the last time we can fish until spring,” was the way Tony put it. “The catfish’ll be biting.” Tony always thought the fish were biting, and Fritz and Aaron usually went along because he brought the Schlitz beer.

Fritz, Tony and Aaron had first been playground friends in grade school, teammates in sports and classmates in high school. When they were nine years old, behind Tony’s father’s bakery, using Aaron’s pocketknife they cut their fingers and pressed them together, vowing to be blood brothers for life. Playmates, classmates, teammates and brothers, now they could become war-mates.

Fritz Adele was a fourth-generation German American--his great-grandfather landed in the states in 1750 on the ship Phoenix. His prototype Aryan blond hair and blue-eyed intensity were gifts from his Swedish schoolteacher mom. He was about the same height as Aaron, a full six feet, but his broader shoulders and a barrel chest gave him the look of a bear-wrestler. Muscular from head to toe, his thick neck blended into broad shoulders. Without a t-shirt he drew second glances even from other boys. His father worked for the Enterprise Coal Company, one of the top coal producers in the state, employing half the Ankeny population.

Tony Stallone was a head shorter than either of his blood brothers. He was one hundred percent Italian with a Roman nose, long dark face, and lean wiry body. Tony, cheerfully nicknamed “Wop” by his close friends, lived on a small farm just a mile as the crow flies from Aaron’s. His folks owned a small bakery in Highland Park, on the north side of Des Moines, delivering fresh Italian bread, dinner rolls, sweet-cream or jam-filled Cornettos and Panettone to area grocery stores and homes.

War talk was hard to avoid and Tony’s bragging and Fritz’s steely patriotism were logs on the fire of schoolboy pressure. The threat of being drafted loomed over hero stories, anxiety and patriotism running high in the rising count of boys who had already enlisted and died. Being drafted felt less patriotic than volunteering, but Aaron still felt torn.

The fish weren’t biting and the cloudless full moon night was turning frosty. Tony sat on the river bank covered with a blanket. “Fritz, what are you gonna do?” Tony asked.

Without hesitation, Fritz answered, “I’m in. It’s the right thing to do. I ain’t waiting to be drafted!”

Tony added quickly. “Me too.” Looking to Fritz, he continued, “I’d better join up or the war’ll be over before I get there. If we all sign up together, I heard they’ll send us to the same unit.”

“Wouldn’t that be wacky?” Fritz chuckled.

“Aaron?” Tony poked him. “Hey, you awake?”

Aaron was especially quiet tonight. He knew Fritz and Tony's folks were different. Tony's father liked to talk about his Army days in World War I, how they broke through the German lines in the battle of the Hindenburg Line, a hundred-day offensive. Aaron wanted to do the right thing, but Maty and Bat'ko would be so disappointed. Still, he was going to be drafted anyway, so why not? After a long silence Aaron said, "Let's join tomorrow. You really think we could stay together?"

Tony had pulled the blanket tight and was snoring. "I'm sure Wop's with us," Fritz said with a snort. "But I think he might sleep through the war."

"You and me better stand guard," Aaron said, laughing.

For several minutes both boys contemplated the commitment they'd just made as they watched the black river water move slowly like molten lava, to the sounds of a hoot owl and Tony's snoring.

Fritz broke the silence. "Don't feel like you have to."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have to join up--just because we're friends."

"What are you saying?"

"If you want to--but if you want to wait..."

After a long silence, Fritz looked back to Aaron. "You still awake?"

Aaron huddled under a blanket staring across the water, watching a taut fishing line pulsate in the swift current. The moon trailed directly up to his feet. He grunted just enough to acknowledge the question.

"I wonder if I'll make it back," Fritz said softly.

Aaron pondered the statement, wondering what to say, or whether to say anything. "What are you talking about? Don't think like that."

"I just had a weird feeling."

Aaron shivered. "Nah. Not you, man." Suddenly the wind shifted to the northwest. Iowa winters usually rode in on northwest winds. "I don't think war is all they're saying it is. Do you believe all that stuff?"

"Nah, it's all just talk."

"What do you think my chances are?" Aaron asked.

"I'd bet on you, mister smarty pants." Fritz always knew how to cheer him up. Aaron had earned all A's on his last report card. For the first time. But Fritz always got A's. Tony, on the other hand struggled for C's. "You know..." Fritz didn't finish the sentence and the moment drifted in the cool night air. "You know, I figure there are two kinds of people, those who can kill and those who can't." He looked over at Aaron. "Do you remember when Billy Hunter came after you? I heard he sucker punched you. What was that all about?"

"Billy thought I put some chickens in the front seat of his truck. Guess they made a mess."

"Heard you walked away. You could have kicked his ass. Hell, you could kick my ass."

Aaron couldn't think of anything to say, "Could you--you know, kill someone? Would it bother you at all?"

"Sure, I can. Damn straight I could." Fritz answered proudly.

"I don't know," Aaron said. "It's hard to imagine killing someone. Seems they're just soldiers. They'd be like us, wouldn't they?"

"I can't think about that. That'd get me killed for sure." The river lapped against the riverbank as Tony's snoring grew louder. "OK, if a man rapes and kills your sister, you'd have to kill him, right?" Fritz asked.

“I don’t have a sister.”

“I would. Wouldn’t everybody?”

“I’d like to kill your sister. She’s always hanging around.”

“Yeah,” Fritz chuckled.

A few minutes later Aaron broke the silence. “You mean, if I caught him in the act, or after he was arrested?”

“Like it would make a difference!” A few minutes later Fritz tossed a rock in the river and laughed. “I put the chickens in Billy’s truck.”

Aaron laid back on his blanket and smiled. Pulling his coat tight, he folded his arms and stared into the sky, only a few brave stars were visible in the full-moon night.

When he was young his father bought him a BB gun for Christmas, and every day he lined up cans on the fencepost and before long he became a good shot. He even called his mom and dad from the barn to show them how from twenty yards he could plink one off its perch in rapid fire. Months later, walking in the wooded area behind their house, his BB gun slung over his shoulder, he spotted a cardinal in a tree, and slowly crept up to within a few yards of the bird. The Cardinal didn’t fly away, basking in the first warm summer day, singing, calling for a mate...*purdy purdy purdy...whoit, whoit, whoit, whoit.*

Psst! The BB hit the Cardinal mid-chest and a red drop of blood appeared. The Cardinal turned his head and tried to shake his feathers to rid himself of the pinch in his chest, staring at Aaron as if he were asking why. *Purdy, purdy, purdy...* He leaned forward and fell, banging into the branches of the tree and then to the ground. His feet were stiff and pointed skyward. Aaron remembered his heart beating fast, as if he’d just sprinted up the road.

A rustling in the woods nearby startled Aaron. A deer crept out into the open, as if he were attempting to tip-toe past the three boys. The buck still had a rack of antlers on one side, having shed the other. Was this Aaron’s buck? Was that too long ago?

When he was ten, his father took him hunting for the first time. They sat at dusk in the brush, out of sight, waiting for what his dad promised the biggest buck he would ever see. “It will be a full rack, antlers here to there - you will see, son,” holding his hands out wide. They held their breath, listening intently for the buck breaking through the brush. Every sound sent off alarm bells. Just as his eyelids were beginning to droop, his dad nudged him. There, larger than he imagined, was the buck.

Holding his finger to his lips, moving in slow motion, Bat’ko handed the gun to Aaron. Aaron remembered how important he felt, how grown-up. Manhood offered before its time. Shouldering the gun, just as he had so many times in target practice, he took careful aim. The buck turned and looked back as if he were staring directly at Aaron, his big brown eyes locked on his. The gun exploded and knocked Aaron back. The deer darted into the woods.

Father’s prideful smile turned to a frown when he looked back to Aaron. “What happened? You’re a good shot. Are you blind?”

