

Pass It On®...

A Lesson We Should Never Forget.

The incredible story of American POWs smuggling rations to Russian prisoners at Stalag-B.

In 1988, Charles Kuralt discovered a story of heroism that would have disappeared from history were it not for the determination of a former Russian prisoner who vowed to thank the men who saved his life and the lives of many of his comrades. During the 40 years of the Cold War, Dr. Nikita Aseyev kept the names of the American soldiers safe and close to his heart.

Kuralt was in Moscow to cover the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit when the stocky Dr. Aseyev bulldogged his way into the pressroom and demanded to be heard. Kuralt listened.

“For more than 43 years, I have waited for this chance, and now it has come,” Dr. Aseyev began tearfully. What unfolded was the story of ordinary men: Two farmers from the Midwest, slaughterhouse workers from Chicago, a doctor from Texas and a Jewish doctor from New York City, all thrown into the war against fascism, and all imprisoned in a Nazi POW camp. In Stalag-B, Russian and American allies were separated by two barbed-wire fences about 8 meters apart.

The 8,000 Russians were treated much worse than the Americans. Receiving only one liter of soup a day and one liter of water, they were slowly starving to death.

As the only dentist in all the camp, Dr. Aseyev was allowed to work on the Americans. They sympathized with the plight of Russian prisoners and hatched a plan to smuggle parcels of their Red Cross rations to the Russian side. In one night, the Americans threw 1,300 parcels over the fence to the Russians when a sympathetic Nazi guard turned his back. (The guard was later executed for his leniency.)

“Do you know what that food meant on our side of the wire, where men were dying every night of starvation?” Dr. Aseyev asks. And, of course, prisoners on either side would have been shot had they been caught. The all-night operation carried on monthly for three years.

Forty-three years later, Kuralt’s story ran on television. A few of the Americans who had taken part in the operation agreed to be interviewed. William Jarema of New York arranged to fly to Moscow and meet with Dr. Aseyev. They embraced in the eternal bond of brotherhood — weeping, touching faces, trying to speak — but no words could find their way to the surface through all the emotions.

What they both sought to express was what William had felt when he first found out that Dr. Aseyev was alive. Tears rolling down his cheeks, William had told Kuralt, “These are tears of joy. We were like brothers.”

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