

Daughter helps share father's harrowing story of forgotten Stalinist labor camps

A cold road to truth



Alice Fajntich holds up the book "The Ice Road," which her father wrote in telling of his time in a labor camp in Siberia in the 1940s. Fajntich talked about this book in a January class at UVa, "The Dark Side of the 20th Century."

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Sometimes, when one's existence teeters on the brink of oblivion, the littlest thing can make the biggest difference.

In the case of Dr. Stefan Waydenfeld, it was a note he hastily scribbled when he was 14 years old. Decades later he remembered doing it on impulse.

Whatever mysterious force inspired him to jot the short message in the faint hope it would find its way to his father likely saved both their lives. It was early September 1939, and the Polish teenager already had witnessed the slaughter of fleeing countrymen gunned down by strafing German fighter planes.

Minutes after leaving the note with a young Polish officer, the hungry and exhausted youngster again came under enemy fire. As terrifying as the exploding bombs and rattle of machineguns were, their noise was just the prelude to the extraordinary ordeal that lay ahead.

The carefree teenager quickly became a man after being torn from his peaceful life in the small town of Otwock, Poland. Ahead were countless horrors ranging from the dead-of-night pounding knock on the front door to the brutalizing hardships experienced in a Soviet Union labor camp.

Before the maelstrom of war spun itself out, an estimated 1.7 million Poles were sent into the interior of the USSR. Half of them would perish beneath the grinding wheels of communist rule.

Waydenfeld ultimately would live to fight the Germans on the Italian front. And later, after spending his adult life serving humanity as a physician in London, he would write his story.

Today, his chronicle of survival lives between the covers of "The Ice Road: An Epic Journey From the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom." The book is an eyewitness account that casts a glaring light onto one of the darkest and least known chapters of World War II.

Now, with her elderly father unable to bring the story before the public, Alice Fajntich has taken on the job. She recently presented a talk and slideshow on the subject for "The Dark Side of the 20th Century," a course at the University of Virginia.

"I feel the book is important, because it tells about a part of World War II history that most people, beyond those to whom it happened, are not aware of," said Faintich, who now makes her home in Nellysford.

"Many Americans don't know that the Germans and the Soviet Union were on the same side at the beginning of the war. My father and grandparents lived near the border with the Soviet Union.

"[Joseph] Stalin had territorial ambitions, and the Polish people who would be standing in his way would be the intelligentsia. These were the doctors, teachers, lawyers and even shopkeepers, because they were seen as capitalists.

"So the Russians rounded up and deported as many as 1.7 million Poles living in these border areas. This was a way of getting all these people out of the way."

It's widely known that Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. That an opportunistic Stalin sent his Red Army across the eastern border of Poland two weeks later on Sept. 17, is far less known.

The mailed fist of the Nazis' occupying forces didn't outdo the brutality of the Russians. In just one unspeakable act, the Soviet secret police murdered more than 22,000 Polish officers and civilians in what became known as the Katyn Forest massacre.

"What struck me in reading the book were all the coincidences that made the biggest differences," Faintich said. "The note my father wrote, for example.

"If not for the note, my grandfather would have probably ended up as one of the Polish officers murdered at Katyn Forest, like his brother was. The reason he left [his post as a medical officer in the Polish Army reserves] was because of the note."

Although Faintich's father had just turned 14, he and three of his friends had set out together to join the Polish Army after the German invasion. They first tried to link up with Dr. Waydenfeld at the hospital where he was working.

When the boys reached the hospital, it was being evacuated, and they were told all the doctors had already left. Nonetheless, Waydenfeld left the note, which told where they were headed and could be found.

In fact, the father had not yet left the hospital and got the note soon after his son left. He immediately set out to find his boy, which he did a few days later.

Poland had been thrown into chaos by the invading armies, and not one ally made even a token gesture to help. The Polish people were on their own, and a resiliency and stalwart courage quickly emerged that would define them throughout the war.

For every egregious crime against humanity, there were countless acts of selfless kindness. A ransacking of the Waydenfeld home by thieving Russian troops was countered by the goodness of strangers who shared what they had with the displaced family.

The book reads like an adventure yarn, even as it offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when evil systems of government are allowed to exist. It also shows how human vermin rapidly emerge to do the bidding of such regimes.

Feeding on the intoxicant of power, these cruel sorts with shabby souls gladly perform every manner of sin against humanity. And when their masters are no more, they seek anonymity.

Bearing witness against the unjust becomes the duty of the just. And, as Waydenfeld's memoir proves, there is no time limit for doing this.

At the end of the book is an interview Faintich did with her father. One of the questions she asked was why it took him so long to tell his story.

"In the 1940s and early 1950s, the Soviet government engaged in a cover-up about its treatment of Polish prisoners and deportees during World War II," Dr. Waydenfeld said. "As a result, expatriate Poles were unpopular in the West and viewed as intruders causing problems by asking awkward questions."

"For example, who was responsible for the Katyn Forest massacre? Back then, nobody wanted to know, the wartime propaganda machine having promoted the Soviet allies."

"We were considered liars and Stalin was seen as good old Uncle Joe. It wasn't until some years after Stalin's death that the truth started to emerge and people were finally receptive to hearing it."

World War II magazine called the book "a masterful recounting that spares nothing except self-pity." The absence of personal laments is all the more remarkable because of the innumerable opportunities for them.

The ice road alluded to in the title was used to haul logs out of the frozen forests of northern Russia. When the deportees arrived at the labor camp, they were told they would spend the rest of their lives there.

This statement was followed by another that roughly translates to, "You will get used to it or, if you won't, you'll croak." Only those with the strongest constitutions and will to live survived.

When they were reduced to a minimal existence, a piece of sausage and a hunk of bread would provide an upsurge of spirit, Waydenfeld recounts. A handful of dried pumpkin seeds would be a luxury.

There is much to learn in this inspiring testament to human will and innate dignity.

"I think one of the things the book shows is that there's no black or white, only gray," Faintich said. "Not all Russians were bad."

"The government, the system, may have been largely bad, but the Russian people were suffering just as much as everyone else. Yes, there were evil people who would sell you out for a crust of bread, but you can't color everyone with the same brush."

"I think that's an outlook you get from reading this book."

The book, "The Ice Road: An Epic Journey From the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom" by Stefan Waydenfeld, is published by Aquila Polonica Limited and is available at most bookstores.

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http://www.dailyprogress.com/lifestyles/a-cold-road-to-truth/article_cafb0db8-f5a8-5980-8d32-77b462736cd8.html