

A celebration of peace, not war

By Nate Smelle

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to spend the better part of a day listening to Bancroft's ex-Soviet spy Andy Klashenko share his experiences spying on and being captured by the Nazis during the Second World War. Out of fear for his family's safety, he kept his story a secret for some 50 years, hidden even from those he loved most. Klashenko described the horror he faced while staring down the barrel of a gun, hiding out from the Nazis in his grandfather's windmill and on several other occasions. When asked what the most important lesson he learned during wartime, he broke down for a moment and then proceeded to recount the events which unfolded on the day the British arrived at the Nazi labour camp to free the prisoners.

While walking along the road to visit a friend at a neighbouring farm, Klashenko heard a shot ring out from the bushes beside him. Seeking out the origin of the sound, he came across a Nazi soldier that had been shot in the foot. Standing over the wounded enemy was a British soldier with a rifle and a bayonet. Expecting the soldier to finish him off, Klashenko was surprised when all of a sudden he dropped his rifle, fell to his knees and started crying. Instead of killing his wounded enemy, the British soldier called in a medic to treat him. While the medic was treating the enemy combatant, Klashenko asked the British soldier why he didn't shoot his enemy. The soldier told him that when he took aim at the young man on the ground, all he could see was the face of his 16-year-old son back in England.

Moved by the fact the soldier had chosen peace during wartime, his eyes filled with tears and Klashenko said, "Two people, so different who were supposed to fight and just imagine, he said he saw his son instead of an enemy,"

Although a few days later the war was over, as we all know this was not the war to end all wars. Sadly, many more have followed? the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the so-called War on Terror, etc. Throughout human history, military conflicts where people lose their lives fighting for freedom, or simply from living in the line of fire, have tragically become the status quo. During the Vietnam War, it is estimated that 587,000 civilians were killed. During the Korean War, South Korea reported some 373,599 civilian deaths. When the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on Aug. 6, 1945, 80,000 people died instantly and another 112,020 were killed by radiation in the aftermath of the attack. Three days later, another 70,000 people were killed instantly as another atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki. How many of these deaths were acceptable collateral damage?

Earlier this year, I sat down for an interview with a Syrian family who fled their home city of Jaramana to find sanctuary here in Canada. Rana Bshara, her husband, Antoun Maalouf, and their two young children, Soleil and Ghassan, knew first-hand how terrifying it is to live in a war zone. Politically, Bshara and Maalouf do not support the rebels, or Bashar al-Assad's regime. Like the majority of Syrian citizens, their concern is for the country they love and the innocent people who live there.

Recalling how beautiful and culturally diverse Syria was prior to the civil war, they expressed how incredibly painful it is to see the images of carnage from their homeland in the media. The decision to leave was not an easy one, however, after several close calls with the dangers of the war, the couple decided it was time to move somewhere safe where they could raise their children in peace. The first time Maalouf came close to becoming collateral damage, he was leaving the house with his kids to go out for the day. As soon as he moved his car, a mortar shell fell down right behind him, where the car had been parked.

"If I had stayed there one second longer, it would have hit me," he said with a shaky voice.

Bshara has also experienced the terror one feels when living and working in a place that is being bombarded by rockets and mortar shells on a daily basis. She described to me what it was like when her office was shelled and the sick feeling in her stomach she had when she discovered shrapnel lodged in the slide at the playground where her children played.

"We just want to live, to be safe, to go to work without being terrified that we will be killed," she said.

"We want to be able to send our kids to school without having this fear that something will happen to them."

With many family members still in harm's way, Maalouf said they pray every day that peace will return to Syria and the world.

At times like these when hatred and divisiveness are on the rise, our leaders need to stand up for peace, instead of smirking in the background while the bullies wage war. As far as I'm concerned, his silence, our silence, implies complicity. As the author William S. Burroughs once said, "There are no innocent bystanders."