

Learning from the past



By Nate Smelle

WATCHING THE TANKS and other military hardware roll through down the main street in Coe Hill during the Warriors' Day celebration in Coe Hill over the Labour Day weekend I could not help but think of the terror that ex-Soviet spy Andy Klashenko spoke of experiencing as a 14-year-old boy when the Nazis took him prisoner. Stolen from his home and forced to work in a labour camp for more than two and a half years one might expect Klashenko to exude anger when he speaks of the inhumanities he witnessed and survived.

Speaking with him in the comfort of his home here in Bancroft I discovered this was not at all the case. Instead what I found was a kind and humble man, who wants to share the story of his survival during World War Two with others in hopes that future generations can learn from the mistakes of the past.

So moved by his story it was difficult to find questions that I could ask which could bring out any more of the essence of his encounters any better. I was speechless when he told me how the greatest wisdom he learned throughout the war and his imprisonment came to him when he watched a British soldier drop his gun and call a medic rather than kill a young wounded Nazi soldier.

Now at nearly 89-years-old Klashenko looks back at his life and all of the troubles he has experienced and sees himself as a lucky man. He does not only see himself as lucky because he lived through one of the bloodiest periods of human history, he sees himself as fortunate because he was able to live in comfort for much of his life with his wife Eva and his three children Andrew, Susan and Christine.

Every time Klashenko spoke of his family and his friends he would smile and excitedly show me photographs of the people and places he cared for to help illustrate his story. The more I listened to him, the more I wanted to know about his life.

The depth and importance of Klashenko's story goes far deeper than any mere words can express. Still, it is through his words that the lessons from his life will live on.

In his lifetime Klashenko said he has recognized how the human race has difficulty looking to the past and into the future further than 60 years. By preserving his firsthand account of life in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany during World War Two through Councillor Lorraine Fell's book and in the media he is able to extend the short-sightedness of our species in hopes of helping generations still yet to be born.

Every story he shared with me on this day only affirmed how genuinely concerned Klashenko is and always has been for the welfare of others.

Just before I was about to leave Klashenko said he had one more story that he wanted to share which he had not included in Fell's book.

When the war was over Klashenko returned to the Vugelsang's farm to help the family with some work they needed done. As he stood with their daughter Anna in the residence two soldiers of unknown allegiances entered the home. The two unknown soldiers dressed in plain clothes then forced themselves on Anna in an attempt to rape her. Klashenko got between the two men and Anna and yelled for them to stop what they were doing. When they did not listen he tried yelling at them in all five languages he knew. They did not respond. With Klashenko still standing his ground one of the men lifted his rifle and held it to Klashenko's head. Still he stood strong. Realizing he was not going to let them get away with raping his friend the man lowered his gun and the two men left.

It is not too often one gets to meet someone as rich in life experience who is as willing as Andy Klashenko to share it with the rest of us.