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A Christmas Tale -- 1919

By [HANS VON SPAKOVSKY](#)

It's easy to complain in the midst of a stressful holiday season. But my family has a unique remedy: We remember one special Christmas in 1919 that gave us the freedom and liberty we enjoy today. This will be the 89th anniversary of the year my father celebrated Christmas Eve deep in the snow-laden woods of Russia as he fled the Communist takeover of his homeland.

When I tell people that my father was an officer in the White Army who fought the Bolsheviks in the Russian civil war, they usually look at me with disbelief, because I am only 49. But he married and started a family later in life, after he lived through both world wars.

He had been an officer in the Russian Army in World War I; after the Bolshevik putsch he ended up fighting against them in the far north of Russia. In 1919 he was close to the Arctic Circle in the port city of Arkhangelsk, where at the beginning of the year, six feet of snow fell and the temperature was regularly 30 degrees below zero.

The Allies -- the English, Americans and French -- had put military forces in Russia, including in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, in 1918. When they withdrew in September 1919, the White Army forces faced dire peril: Their source of supplies, including arms, was gone. Many regular soldiers deserted en masse to the Bolsheviks.

As the situation deteriorated, my father and his unit were surrounded. They fought until very few supplies remained. By December, their commander told them that they would soon be unable to continue to fight and that the Bolsheviks had promised that surrendering White forces would be freed and sent home.

But my father knew that the communists shot the officers they captured. The only way he could escape was through the frozen White Sea on the lone icebreaker in the port, which was not large enough to evacuate everyone. Only a small number of high-ranking White Russian officers eventually fled that way.

One woman and 16 men, including my father, decided they would try to get out another way. In the middle of a very snowy night, they skied through the Bolshevik lines toward Finland. As my father later told his five children, it was an arduous and long journey. They had so little food that at one point they were

reduced to eating the beeswax candles they carried with them.

They soon ceased to count the days. Time became amorphous as they traveled through the chilling cold of an Arctic winter in the darkness of the deep woods. Their singular goal was to avoid Bolshevik patrols.

On one of those timeless, dark days, my father said, the woman in their group reminded the men of something they had all lost track of -- tomorrow would be Christmas Eve.

The next day they skied 'til the beams of the sun turned the treetops golden and the shadows in the forest became longer and longer. They stopped in a small glade for the night, and my father cut down a small fir. They placed some of their remaining candles on its branches and adorned it with blue ribbons cut from a blouse the woman had carried in her knapsack.

With the dark veil of night covering them, they lit the candles and their small pine became a Christmas tree. The scene seemed almost mystical to my father -- 17 human beings sitting in the glow of a makeshift Christmas tree in the thicket of a primeval forest. They forgot about the frost of the northern wintry night, their exhaustion, and their anxiety about the future.

No more hatred remained in their hearts, my father told us -- only love for God and men alike, friends and enemies. They said a prayer, sang some Christmas hymns, and then sat silently, thinking about what they had lost and were leaving behind, including their families. (My father never saw his mother or his father again.) The candles burned out, and it became dark again around them.

The next day they resumed their journey. Once Christmas had passed, and they did not encounter any Bolshevik patrols, my father felt they had been saved. Two weeks later, they arrived safely in Finland. They had skied hundreds of kilometers through the wilderness in the dead of winter.

My father died in 1988, just short of his 93rd birthday. There is a lot more to his story -- great drama, more danger, and adventures that he always said were better to recall as memories than to have lived through. He eventually immigrated to the United States with my mother, whom he met in 1946 in a refugee camp in occupied Germany.

So this Christmas, besides opening presents and singing carols, my family will observe one other tradition. We will drink a toast and give thanks to a man who fled a murderous, cruel dictatorship and gave us a gift more precious than anything else: the chance to grow up in freedom and to enjoy the liberty that is our birthright as Americans. Merry Christmas!

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