

IN THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT WORLD

Together again

The Review is particularly happy to publish an article in its columns which was received from the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR. This article is devoted to two sisters, Natalya and Galina Golovacheva, who were reunited after 42 years. It is worthwhile both for its invaluable emotional connotations and for the expression of solidarity it evinces between National Societies and the ICRC.

Natalya sent an enquiry to the Alliance to find out what had happened to her sister and as a result a query was submitted to the International Tracing Service (ITS)¹ which is an integral part of the ICRC Central Tracing Agency (CTA). The ITS discovered that Galina was living in Belgium thus enabling the Central Tracing Agency to contact the Belgian Red Cross and, through it, to find Galina and help her to get in touch with Natalya.

As chance would have it, the ICRC was making a film on co-operation between the CTA and the National Societies and so the reuniting of the two sisters in January 1987 was included in the film as a most apt illustration. The film producer, Jean Daniel Bloesch (a former CTA delegate), went to Belgium to film Galina and then, thanks to the helpfulness of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR, he obtained the authorization to meet Natalya in Moscow. Galina also went to Moscow with the film crew and the Alliance arranged for the two sisters to meet in front of the cameras.

In addition, Galina and Natalya appeared on the Soviet television news, laid a bouquet of flowers on the tomb of the unknown soldier in memory of their father and visited the Alliance's Tracing Service.

¹ For a report on the activities and history of the ITS see pp. 238.

SISTERS MEET FORTY YEARS AFTER WAR

In April 1985 Natalya Golovacheva, a 60-year-old resident of Tomsk (Siberia), asked the USSR Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to help her in finding her sister Galina. The two sisters lost each other in April 1945 in Germany, where they had been forcibly brought from Kursk by the Nazis. The search was carried out through the Central Tracing Agency and ended in Brussels, where Galina Golovacheva, the widow of the Belgian Noel Thomas, was living in an old people's home. In January 1987, after more than 40 years, the two sisters met in Moscow.

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Before Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union the Golovachevs lived in Kursk, a city located a thousand kilometres from the USSR's western border. Natalya, 16, was a schoolgirl and Galina, 19, was a medical student. When the war broke out their father left Kursk because his enterprise was moved east. He was killed in an air raid on his way to the new location.

Kursk was occupied by the Nazis, and German officers settled in the Golovachevs' house. In the severe winter weather, the mother and the two girls huddled in the half-ruined shed without warm clothes, firewood or food. All they had to eat was food for the poultry, which the invaders had allowed them to take. The Nazi occupation cut through the sisters' memory like a horrible nightmare: public executions, corpses set up in the streets to intimidate people, curfew, night shooting and violence.

In the spring of 1942 Natalya and Galina were ordered to register for deportation to Germany. Those who did not report were shot. The mother, though above the age limit, went to the assembly point with her daughters.

They were crammed into a truck and taken to the "sorting" camp in Brest, at the USSR-Polish border. There, the sick were shot. Out of the 1,500 people who arrived, less than half remained alive.

From Brest the Golovachevs were taken to Brunswick (West Germany) and sent to work at the Schmalbach can factory. They worked from 12 to 14 hours a day, receiving 200 grams of rye bread, and swede or turnip soup. Women were starving and dying, many of them of TB.

Among the workers was a German political prisoner called Ernst. He felt sorry for Natalya, and his wife would secretly give her a little piece of bread with margarine every day. "You are young, you must live, and Hitler is doomed", he would tell her. "Maybe we owe our lives to Ernst", Natalya recalls.

At the factory Galina became acquainted with a Belgian prisoner, a *member of the Resistance Movement*, Noel Thomas. He was actively involved in the camp's underground activities. Galina and other Slav girls helped him organize the escape of three French prisoners.

The war was drawing to an end and the prisoners were eagerly awaiting the arrival of the liberators. The camp fence had been destroyed in an air raid and energetic Noel decided to run away with Galina, without waiting for the Americans. "I'll find you very soon" was Galina's last phrase to her mother and sister. Fate decided otherwise.

Nazi Germany surrendered. Natalya Golovacheva and her mother returned to Kursk. In 1946 they were told that Galina was dead.

But she was alive. Noel had taken her to his mother's home in Brussels. She sent letters to her old address and to other relatives, but there was no response. Years passed. Galina and Noel became the parents of two daughters. Noel suffered from a grave illness and in 1969, at 50, he died. Galina had to work hard all her life. She was a charwoman and a dishwasher, she worked in a bakery and sold newspapers. Her last job was that of a chemical technician at the Brussels Free University, where she applied the knowledge gained at the medical institute before the war. Now she lives in an old people's home. She often visits her daughters and is very fond of her grandchildren.

Now why did Galina's letters to the Soviet Union remain unanswered?

Learning about her death the mother and sister stopped waiting for her. After graduating from the technical school Natalya had asked to be sent to work in Siberia. The war had scattered many of her former acquaintances and relatives, and some of them were dead. (A total of 20 million Soviet citizens were killed in the war, about half of them civilians. More than 1,700 cities were destroyed.)

In Siberia Natalya Golovacheva entered a building institute and after graduation worked in a building department for more than 30 years. She never married, sharing the fate of many women whose sweethearts were killed in the war. She adopted a six-year-old girl and became the guardian of her two brothers. At the age of 50 Natalya's mother died. Natalya herself is now retired and lives with her daughter, who is married and has two children.

At the beginning of 1985 Natalya was told that a foreigner was trying to find her relatives in Kursk. Who the foreigner was Natalya did not know, but a hope that her sister might be alive filled her heart. On July 8, 1985, she turned to the Alliance, which sent an inquiry to the Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC in Geneva. On October 9, 1986, Galina's address was traced.

In January 1987, the Alliance, the ICRC and the Belgian Red Cross organized Galina's four-day trip to the USSR, and after more than 40 years the sisters met again. Both of them wept tears of joy and sorrow at once—the joy of finding each other and the sorrow for their youth lost in the war.

More than 40 years have passed since World War II, but the wounds it has left in human hearts are still bleeding. The Soviet Red Cross still receives about 30,000 letters annually from Soviet and foreign citizens wishing to find out the fate of their relatives lost during the war.
