

Fortunate Son: Dubna-LaCrosse Sister City Founder David Bell

By Barbara Ruben

By most conventional measures, David Bell would not be considered a lucky man. In 1931, when Bell was a boy, his father uprooted the family from balmy Houston, Texas, to the frigid Moscow winter. His father's dream to build the "bright future" of Communism crashed down on him when he was imprisoned on a false charge of distributing anti-Soviet propaganda. As a "sapper" defusing mines during World War II, Bell was injured three times. Then, upon completing college after the war, the government sent Bell to Siberia to teach just a day before paperwork came through that would have landed him a plum assignment in Moscow. And, always, fear pervaded his days, fear that he would lose another member of his family, that an informer was listening to every syllable Bell spoke, that he would never be allowed to see the United States again.

But Bell, 75, insists that fortune has been on his side. "I say I am a lucky person. There were many occasions when I shouldn't have survived," says the man who created the LaCrosse, Wisconsin-Dubna, Russia Sister Cities project and who has been instrumental in keeping AIHA's health care partnership work between the cities at the forefront of the sister cities program.

For example, because his father was branded an enemy of the people, Bell escaped conscription into the Red Army that fought Finland during the brutal winter of 1939, during which 165,000 lives were lost. Then, although Russia entered World War II in 1941, as a student, he wasn't drafted until the final two years of the war. Despite the perilous work crawling through mine fields on his belly defusing or planting explosives, Bell's injuries were minor. He recalls stepping on a mine once in a field so thick with explosives that to fall meant tripping two or three other mines. But Bell hit the smallest kind of mine with the sturdy heel of his boot and was blown straight up in the air, landing back exactly where he began, escaping injury from other mines.

Only three percent of men born in Russia in 1920 and 1921 survived the war, he says. "We're talking luck. No doubt about it."

During a recent visit to LaCrosse from Dubna, Bell recounted his propitious path through three-quarters of a century of Russian and American history and his work to foster understanding between communities 4,000 miles apart.

During the 1905 Revolution in Russia and subsequent persecution of Jews, Bell's grandparents gathered their eight children, one of whom was Bell's father, and fled from Ukraine to Texas. Bell's mother also immigrated. Bell was born in Houston in 1921. Ten years later, his father led a group of Texas tourists on a trip to Moscow, became captivated by what he saw as an opportunity to build Communism and sent for Bell and Bell's mother, sister and brother.

Bell's family arrived in Moscow in December 1931. "It was so cold," he recalls with clarity 65 years later. "It was a shock."

It was a difficult transition for the family, moving from a single-family, middle-class home with a yard and a car and plenty of food to one room in a house occupied by many families and heated only by a wood stove in the hall.

When he was first permitted to leave the country to visit the United States 56 years later, a Russian customs agent stopped him on the way back to Dubna. "He couldn't understand. Here was my passport that said my name was Bell and that I was born in Houston, Texas," Bell

recalls. "He said, 'What are you doing here?' I said, 'I live here.' He said, 'Why did your parents come here? Are they crazy?' Boy was that funny."

Although Bell laughs recounting the story now, there was little humorous about his first years in Russia. Seven years after arriving in Moscow, a neighbor who was secretary of the party organization accused Bell's father, for no discernible reason, of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda.

"My father was taken away. We were kicked out of our room and spent the night in the yard. I was not yet 17 when the fear was instilled," he says.

And that fear has never completely loosened its grip. During Bell's first trip to America in 1987, he did a newspaper interview, but trembled throughout the questions, even then afraid to talk openly about his life. Bell is fond of paraphrasing a quote by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, who said, "We have to squeeze the slave out of us drop by drop." Bell substitutes the word "fear" for slave.

During World War II, Bell found his calling as a teacher. As an educated man, he was asked to teach men with little schooling. Although he had originally trained to be an English translator, Bell spent most of his professional life teaching a variety of subjects, from English to science, to children from kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

To repay the government for his education, Bell was obligated to work for three years wherever he was assigned. He ended up teaching in Siberia. Despite the desolation and the fact that he and his first wife divorced over difficulties of life in such a bleak area far from home, Bell says he learned important lessons from his time in Siberia.

"Here is where I saw the first person who actively protested against the system," he says. "A plumber at the school refused to give a month of pay to the Soviet government for its loan program. He said, 'What has Soviet power given me?' That was astonishing. I was amazed. I then understood there are brave people who can stand up like that."

After leaving Siberia, Bell lived in Voskresensk, about 50 miles southeast of Moscow, until he moved to Dubna in 1961, where he taught school and compiled English study manuals for engineers at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research until he retired in 1980. He calls his time in Dubna the best years of his life.

In the 1980s, his son, who works with computers, left Russia for England and his daughter, an artist, moved to Vermont.

"For my wife Katya it was a tragedy that her son would leave the country and be a traitor. So I told my son, listen, things are going to get better. This was in 1987. There are several phrases I remember in my life, and one was when my son said, 'Daddy, this country is never going to get better.'"

But for Bell there has never been any question about leaving. His wife's family still lives in Russia, he loves living in Dubna and he says that he would miss the intimacy of the kind of friendship in Russia that isn't found in America.

"There's a saying in Russia: 'I'm not the last boy in the village,'" he says. "That means I have something left to do for Dubna. I'm enjoying what I'm doing in Dubna for the sister cities."

Under Bell's guidance, the sister city program has enjoyed enormous success since it started in 1990. AIHA's health care partnership between Hospital No. 9, Central City Hospital and Bolshaya Volga Hospital in Dubna and Lutheran Hospital and St. Francis Hospital in LaCrosse,

has made great strides in using disease management techniques to help patients take charge of managing their diabetes. Through the partnership, Dubna built a model diabetes education school. The partnership has also created a home health care program for 300 elderly Dubna residents and instituted the first Alcoholics Anonymous groups in Dubna.

"The medical exchange is one of the things that makes our sister city relationship rate very high among sister city programs," Bell says.

Bell's efforts sparked an additional health care initiative. Bell, an atheist, helped organize a United Church of Christ in Dubna, and since then a church of that denomination in Texas has sent glucose test strips and insulin for the Dubna's diabetes initiatives. He says he helped with the church not out of religious commitment, but from a desire to open doors to new ways of thinking and help in a small way to stand up to state ownership of many aspects of life.

The sister city relationship has also fostered numerous exchanges: Each year a teacher from Dubna spends three months teaching about Russian culture in LaCrosse and a Wisconsin teacher travels to Dubna to teach English and help students learn about American culture. Students from Dubna are now studying at the University of Wisconsin in LaCrosse. This summer environmental studies students from the University of Wisconsin are attending the International University in Dubna. And 50 ballet dancers from LaCrosse will be attending Dubna's highly rated ballet school this summer.

"Dave can best be described as the grandfather of the sister cities program. He really symbolizes what it's all about, people reaching out to people," says Sandra McCormick, president of the LaCrosse-Dubna Sister Cities organization and vice president of Lutheran Hospital. "If you ever go to Dubna, Dave will be the first person to welcome you."

In March, the city of LaCrosse celebrated Russia Week, sponsored by the University of Wisconsin, which focused on the exchanges between the two cities. During the celebration, Bell spoke both about his life and about the then upcoming presidential election in Russia.

Bell worries about the resurgence of communism in Russia and also that young people are apathetic about voting. But at the same time, Bell has an unshakable faith that the work he and other sister cities members are doing is vital to the future of his country.

"I'm proud of taking part in a thing like this," he says. "I justify my life this way."

And although he is not religious, Bell believes that there has been a purpose behind the luck that has guided him to reach out through the sister cities program.

When pressed about what he attributes his luck to, Bell first talks about his devastation over the death last year of Walter Vallejo from cancer. Vallejo, an endocrinologist with the Skemp Clinic in LaCrosse, had been the driving force behind the AIHA partnership with Dubna. After last October's ceremony that dedicated the Dubna Diabetes Center to Vallejo, Bell expressed his sadness to Vallejo's wife and sister-in-law.

"I said a phrase that maybe offended them. I said, 'What sort of God have you got if he takes away the lives of such wonderful people?'"

Vallejo's sister-in-law replied that Vallejo's mission was over.

"I'm not sure about that," Bell says. "But when I think about it, I attribute my luck to the fact that my mission is not over yet."