Bruno Putze, a Veterans Day veteran: Peter Jedick

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A painting of the late Bruno Putze done by his wife Miriam shows him in traditional dress before his post-World War II emigration to the United States.

By Peter Jedick

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ROCKY RIVER, Ohio -- My uncle-in-law Bruno Putze died on Veterans Day last year. It was fitting, since he was in two wars for two different countries. Bruno was born in the Serbian city of Belgrade in 1928. A year after his birth, the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes formally united as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

But his family was German and his father was an electrical engineer. They were living a very comfortable life until World War II started. They even owned the apartment building they lived in.

All that changed in 1941, when Hungary and Italy joined the Germans and invaded Yugoslavia. The Germans took over and divided the country up again, but the Serbs resisted.

One day, the Hungarian army showed up at Bruno's apartment building. They told his family that if they harbored any Serbian soldiers, they would all be killed. And since they lived on a main road, the Hungarians hung two Serbian Partisans next to the road as a warning to everyone who came by. It was a stark sight for 13-year-old Bruno.

Three years later, Bruno was playing cards with some friends in the basement of the nearby four-story German Agricultural Center when it was bombed as part of the Allied liberation of Yugoslavia. Half the students were killed. Sixteen-year-old Bruno and the other surviving boys were all conscripted into the German army and sent to the Russian front.

On July 14, 1945, Bruno was shot in the back but, fortunately, the bullet missed his spine and ended up in his right shoulder, where it remained the rest of his life. But he couldn't walk.

He was shipped to a hospital on a pile of straw in a freight train filled with other wounded soldiers. Fortunately, when he was released from the hospital, he ended up in an American prisoner-of-war camp, not a Russian one, where he probably would have been killed.

Bruno was always grateful for his American captors. He remembered how they fed him oatmeal and baked potatoes, a treat for the still 16-year-old.

After the war, he was released from the POW camp and he rejoined his family, who were then living in Austria because they feared the communists running Yugoslavia might persecute them like they did some other members of their family.

There was not much food available after the war. Bruno and his cousin walked 10 miles to the butcher shop for the four pounds of horse meat they were allowed with their ration card.

In 1953, Bruno finally made it to the United States, just in time for the Korean War.

"It took me six years because I could not come to the United States until I had a sponsor in this country," he explained to his kids. "The sponsor would guarantee that I had a job and a place to live so that I wouldn't be a burden to the government."

Eventually, he landed in Cleveland, and started working in a machine shop. He was living the American dream. But a short nine months after arriving in his adopted country, he was drafted by the U.S. Army.

Due to his combat experience, Bruno was put in charge of training other troops. But his men disrespected him because he could barely speak English.

So, the Army sent him to South Korea to work at an Army media center where he taught himself English so quickly that he eventually helped edit the base newspaper.

After the Korean War, Bruno returned to Cleveland, a proud veteran who put the American flag out on his front porch every morning.

"You don't know how good you have it here in America," his niece, Linda Blaha, remembered him telling his relatives.

America could use a few more patriots like Bruno Putze.

Peter Jedick is a Cleveland-area author and historian.