

HARSH REALITY OF '92 CHILLS MEMORIES OF '52

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MOSCOW – This is the winter that stopped Napoleon and Hitler.

It fires snowflakes into the face like frozen needles and sings the nostrils with every breath.

This is the winter that Vladimir Kazantzev, soldier of the KGB's Kremlin guard, slept through in an uncovered foxhole in 1941-42 when the nights got to 30 below and frostbite gnawed at his legs.

It's the winter for which he was awarded the Order of the Great Patriotic War for turning back the invading German troops who had advanced to the outskirts of his city. A shell burst damaged his left ear, and a later case of flu cost him his hearing in it.

This is the winter that Kazantzev, now 69, steps into three times a week from his apartment in central Moscow for a trip to the Dynamo sports club and the swimming exercise that he says keeps him able to walk.

But it is not winter that defines Vladimir Kazantzev, former world-record holder in the 3,000-meter steeplechase and member of the first Soviet Olympic team.

It was the summer of 1952 when he and his teammates went to Helsinki, Finland, and shocked the world with a second-place ranking in the medal standings behind the long-dominant United States, beginning a domination of the Olympic Games that would last 40 years.

Kazantzev, the ex-KGB soldier, won a silver medal. He was upset in world-record time by Horace Ashenfelter of Glen Ridge, N.J., an FBI agent.

It was the first time an FBI agent had ever allowed himself to be followed by a KGB man, newspapers noted.

"It was a perfect show," says Kazantzev's wife, Anastasia, who insists upon sharing their hoard of food and drink with visitors in this time of national hardship.

There are toasts of vodka from tiny crystal goblets bought during Kazantzev's travel abroad as an athlete and later as a national coach. On fine china are pickles, potatoes, pirogies, bacon and the cabbage Anastasia Kazantzev salted last summer.

The Russian winter warms.

The Kazantzevs have occupied the same two-room flat since 1953. They raised their son and daughter in it; the walls and cabinet shelves are covered with mementos of a life in sport and the military.

They are retired now, struggling to live when inflation is plundering their pensions, fervently hoping the collapse of their nation will not result in civil war.

"The optimism we have keeps us going," Kazantzev says.

The czars sent teams to the 1908 and 1912 Olympic Games. The Russian Revolution and the preoccupation of the communist government with political matters kept the nation out of the Olympics between the two world wars.

The Soviet Union, nearly devastated by World War II, was too poor to field a team for the '48 Games in London, so Helsinki marked its Olympic debut.

Kazantzev had won his first Soviet national steeplechase championship two years earlier, when he and his wife lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Moscow. The flat was too hot for him to sleep in during the summer.

"A national champion of the Soviet Union had no place to sleep," Anastasia says. "In summers he went to the neighbor's to sleep on the balcony. The neighbor was a lady, but she performed no tricks."

His memories of Helsinki and meeting the U.S. athletes are rich. Ashenfelter gave him a small patch embroidered with red and white stripes and a blue field with white Olympic rings.

It rests beside the red sash to which are pinned his national championship medals and the Olympic medallion that he keeps on a cabinet shelf.

Ashenfelter led the race until the last lap, when Kazantzev pushed to the front. But Kazantzev stumbled slightly on the water jump and was passed with half a lap remaining.

"Ashenfelter was stronger than I was," Kazantzev says, adding, "Probably he was secretly prepared."

Kazantzev remembers the medal ceremonies and the Soviet national anthem at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics when he was a coach. He won't hear it when he watches this year's Olympics from Albertville and Barcelona on television.

"It's unpleasant," he says.

"We had the union of the republics, and now we have nothing. Sport should be separate from politics. It's the sportsmen who suffer because of the politicians."

He thinks about the pain in his legs, the silence in his ear and the money he has that is worthless.

"It seems a national champion who had a world record would live better," he says. "We gave the most expensive thing we had, our health, and got nothing back."

He pauses and looks at his wife. He fingers the medals on the red sash he wears when he talks to school children and military groups.

"It is necessary to believe in something," he says. "In the 75th year after the revolution, we are still hoping for better. Thanks to the Lord that the state can send a unified team to the Barcelona Olympic Games."

This is the spirit of the winter that stopped Napoleon and Hitler.

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