

The article below appeared in the Fall 2010 issue of the Newton Community Development Foundation News.

An American Volunteer in the Soviet Red Army

Casselman House resident Nicholas H. Burlak was recently honored by Congressman Barney Frank through a tribute to his extraordinary life entered into the Congressional Record on May 3, 2010. As Frank wrote, “I recently was informed by a group of citizens who live in my district of a remarkable story about one of their neighbors. I admire their spirit in making sure that the inspiring story of their friend and neighbor, Nicholas H. Burlak, is more widely known. And I ask that my remarks here by printed to call attention to Mr. Burlak’s remarkable achievement, so that they may serve as an example to others.”

Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1924, Burlak was only seven years old when his family emigrated from Pennsylvania to the former Soviet Union. His father, a Ukrainian immigrant, lost his job—for attempting to unionize his steel factory—and home during the Great Depression, and decided to move his family to the Ukraine in search of work.

At age 17, when World War II broke out in 1941, and Nazi Germany invaded the USSR, Burlak was determined to do his part to fight the enemy. When his attempt to return to the U.S. to enlist in the Marine Corps failed, he became an American volunteer in the Soviet Red Army to defend his adopted homeland, as well as his country of birth, from Nazi Germany.

During his years in the military, Burlak kept a notebook in his pocket at all times in which he secretly recorded his daily experiences. He describes his fellow soldiers, the horrors of the battlefield, being wounded four times and shell-shocked twice, and his experience liberating American and British pilots who were prisoners of war in Germany. As the war came to an end, Burlak found himself in Berlin, leaving behind the following inscription on the wall of the Reichstag: “Bethlehem, PA, USA—Donbass, Ukraine, Aktyubinsk, Berlin, Germany May 1945—Nicholas.”

After the war ended, Nicholas Burlak completed his higher education in Germany and the Ukraine. He became a dramatist and musical director of variety shows staged throughout the USSR, Latin America and many other countries.

Nicholas Burlak has written a book under the pseudonym of M.J. Nicholas called *Love and War*:



Congressman Barney Frank (right) presents Nicholas Burlak with a copy of the Congressional Record tribute Frank wrote in Burlak’s honor.

An American Volunteer in the Soviet Red Army where he recalls his early childhood in the United States, his family’s struggle during the Great Depression and move to the Ukraine, his harrowing military experiences, and how he finds his first love in the midst of war in a field hospital when a “charming medical second lieutenant” nurses him back from near death after he was seriously wounded during history’s greatest tank battle at Kursk.

Recently, on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the end of WWII, the Russian government awarded Burlak a medal. He is an active member of Massachusetts Veterans for Peace. Last December Burlak brought several of his wartime notebooks to the Newton Free Library and spoke about his memoir. “I enjoy telling audiences about what I’ve learned during my life,” he says. He continues to write, and presents his eyewitness accounts and unique perspective as an American volunteer in the Soviet Red Army during WWII to audiences across the country.

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