

A Strange Friendship

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AN experience I shall never forget came about at an insignificant spot on the German and Soviet Zone of The Austrian border, commonly called "The Iron Curtain" or "The Easternmost Outpost of Democracy."

During a four-year tour of Europe with the United States Army, my unit was assigned the mission of border patrol—a routine duty, twenty-four hours a day, of patrol and observation of "The Iron Curtain" and surveillance of Russian troop activity. It was during a patrol that I met Ivan, a Russian officer of rank equivalent to mine. The Russians had previously ignored us, although at times their officers were fairly congenial to American officers in saluting and in passing small talk back and forth. But Ivan, a new replacement, was strictly a nonconformer.

The first day that I met Ivan I casually greeted him in the German language, sensing he would understand me. Ivan, standing on his side of the border at poker-rod attention, said nothing but glared, expressing deep hatred. This action on his part was rather rude, and I quickly vowed to make him change his nasty habit. Although Ivan had been saturated with the Communist doctrine of extreme hatred for "Capitalists" and their representatives, I was determined to break this hard shell and find a streak of hidden humanity that I was sure Ivan still possessed. I later conceded that this vow was to be a complicated task.

For many days I made frequent trips to Ivan's location, trying to find a possible solution for my task. My first attempts at friendship were futile. I offered him cigarettes, candy, and food but received nothing but refusals in the form of blank stares. I finally gave up this method of changing his attitude and turned in search of other possibilities.

The men in my unit, sensing my situation, began making comments about Ivan's actions and habits in their daily observation reports. It was my responsibility to secure all reports for items requiring immediate action and then forward them to higher headquarters. I also had the opportunity to study Ivan without being so obvious. Report after report contained almost all of his actions in very descriptive form only to reveal him as a staunch military puppet of the Communist regime. He was there for one purpose: to command the fanatical and mechanical soldiers under him with an iron hand until they were to be unleashed upon the free world. Although the reports

were discouraging, I discovered from a slight hint in one that Ivan had acquired and become quite fond of a small puppy. This discovery was to be the key to success. I decided that I should entice the pup over to our side, revealing to Ivan how kind an American could be to animals or humans.

Selecting a choice piece of meat from our mess I proceeded directly to Ivan's location. Upon arrival I found Ivan near the crossing point and playing with his pup. I threw a small piece of meat across the dividing stream, hoping the pup was hungry enough to eat it. My idea began to work. The pup ate it and was waiting for more. I tossed the remaining portion at my feet, and the pup, without hesitation, plunged into the stream and was immediately on my side gulping the meat down. The Russian sentries near by were astonished to see me feed such a large piece of meat to a mere dog, for their rations were very meager. My generosity was hard for them to understand, and, as I had hoped, they began to realize that we were not the type of people they had been led to believe we were. Their rigid training was broken.

I continued to return each day with a meal for the pup. Russians and the pup were waiting each day to see what tasty morsel the pup would receive. One day as I was feeding the little mongrel I suddenly glanced at Ivan and caught him smiling. Being caught off guard, Ivan suddenly blushed like a child caught with his hand in a cookie jar.

Ivan and I became strange friends from that momentous day on. Each time I visited the area we would each stand on our own sides of the demarcation and exchange a few words about the weather or something unimportant and very often take turns tormenting and playing with the pup. The pup, having a grand time, could not possibly have realized, as he ran back and forth between slavery and freedom, that he played a great part in world diplomacy. He had very possibly accomplished what diplomats have been trying to for the whole universe.

A year has passed since I left Europe, and I have often recalled Ivan and his pup, feeling that I accomplished the task I had set out to do. Now, I often wish that I had made my task a little more difficult by trying to entice Ivan to default and surrender himself to the United States for political asylum. Someday we may meet again under other circumstances, should Russia decide that the time is ripe for further aggression and murder. However, from my experience with Ivan I learned that no one is without the basic human feelings of kindness and friendliness. No matter how hard they may attempt to mask them they eventually come forth.

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