One legionnaire’s memory story

Im from Latvia, Liepaja, and my name is Erlands Eliass Griezītis. I study at LMMDV and LVĢ 1, I love music, play piano and saxophone, I like history, especially about both world wars, and how the Latvians tried to protect Latvia. Also i see what kind of damage world wars has done to my homeland Latvia.This summer im visiting my grandma in USA, Seattle. Soon ill be going to Latvian American camp “Kursa”. I want to meet with American Latvians to get new friends un tell them about how our legionnaires were fighting hard for Latvia. Here in Seattle I had a chance to meet with one of them- Imants Bitners, legionnaire, one thing that turns out to be amazing is that Imants was studying at the same school where I am now, only- 80 years ago.

One Saturday morning I was on my way to Mercer Island to meet him. I was greeted by a respectable-looking gentleman. I never had a chance to meet with a real legionnaire. I was surprised, how strong was this white-haired gentleman in his 93 years ! I had already ridden that in 1943, when Nazis occupied Latvia, there was an international law that citizens of the occupied country can’t be called in the army, because of that Nazis created ‘’volunteer legion’’ and work service. Actually that was a way to push man to go in the Nazi sided army. When Imants was 20 years old, he had to make a choice, and he chose the work service. The work service sent him to swamp called Ploči, but after few months he was called in the legion and was sent to Germany. In1944. Autumn, he was sent back to Latvia, Kurzeme, next to Lestene. That’s how he got into the most dangerous war zone-Kurzeme stronghold or Kurzeme cauldron. (The Red Army had almost occupied the whole Lithuanian territory, also the Germany divisions were in Kurzeme cauldron, Latvian legion, and hundreds of thousands local citizens and refugees) Day and night legionnaires spent in the bunkers, at night fighting against the Red army, but at day doing all the necessary stuff and having a brake. In the many fights thousands of men were lost. The future seemed dark and unpredictable, but they didn’t lose their hope. I was interested in whether or not they lived in hunger. Although Imants said that the food was really good for the war condition: bread, milk, a bit of meat, vegetables and a lot of vodka. The food was delivered by the locals. In 1945 spring after the heavy winter, the last fatal fight went down. It was the last Red army’s attack, where both sides lost tens of thousands men, hundreds of tanks and planes. Imants was shot in the hand and contused. The Germans who were alive evacuated the harmed legionnaires to Tukums, so they could take them to Ventspils. In Ventspils they somehow made it to the ship, which took them to Kiel. The ship had to stay in the sea, because the red army still was in the Kiel. On the way to Kiel he met a Latvian named Laimonis.

Finally, when the opportunity to hop off the ship came, they got settled next to ashore, where they in captivity had to live in hard conditions, starving. To get a pack of flour, they gave up their last boots. Luckily they had a chance to steal the German tracksuits. Imants with Laimonis took off their legionnaire uniforms, and put on the stolen tracksuits and luckily ran away from the captivity. Although on the way they got repeatedly questioned whether they were not in the army, nobody got to know and they continued their trip until got to Kiel’s camp nr. 49. And that’s how ends the legionnaire’s Imants Bitners warpath. I stopped the interview because I felt how hard it was for him to tell this memory story. And with I put a point to this story, and wish all the best to Imants Bitners.

