

PHYSICIAN, POET AND PATRIOT

by Frank Stephenson

From a wooden bench in Chicago's Union Station, 12-year-old Russ Zajtchuk (ZATCH-uck) mutely surveyed his new world. All around him, people bustled and chattered gaily in a language he didn't understand.

On the bench beside him sat his uncle and two aunts. They, too, were numbed by the scene, which seemed surreal. For hours now, the family had waited in this incomprehensibly foreign place, weary from the all-night train ride from New York, where they'd landed at Ellis Island just two days before; hungry, tired and worried that the one family that was their only connection to this city—indeed, to this entire country—was lost.

That was October 1951. Though he couldn't have known it then, the run of good luck that had marked young Zajtchuk since birth had just landed him on profoundly fertile ground. His is one of the more remarkable stories of how some children lucky enough to escape a savaged Europe after World War II made the utmost of new lives in the United States.

Just eight years after he stepped off the platform at Union Station—

nearly penniless and speaking not a word of English—Zajtchuk started medical school at the University of Chicago. At 26, he began a residency in general surgery at UC; at 30 he was specializing in cardiothoracic surgery. But at 32, he did something that amazed even the closest friends and relatives who well knew Zajtchuk's stubborn independence: He joined the Army and volunteered for service in a place called Vietnam.

This past fall, Zajtchuk—now an emeritus professor of cardiovascular-thoracic surgery at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center and a retired U.S. Army brigadier general—was elected president of the University of Chicago Medical and Biological Alumni Association. A culmination of 45 years of reverence for—and service to—his alma mater, the tribute also honors an individual who could have been a poster child for self-starters.

Russ Zajtchuk, SB '60, MD '63
Photo by Dan Dry



By the time he sat down in his first med school class in 1959, Zajtchuk had made up his mind about two things: First, he was determined to become a doctor; second, he was determined to do whatever he could to pay something back to the country that had given him the chance to take full advantage of his talents.

Far more than most of his classmates, Zajtchuk knew just how lucky he was to be where he was. From the age of 5, he'd witnessed, firsthand, dark dimensions of humanity that most of his classmates had only read or heard about. He brought to his classes an experience unknown even to most of his instructors, and he would leave med school with much, much more than what he soaked up from textbooks.

Nazi upheaval

Suddenly, in 1944, Zajtchuk and his entire family were on the move. German soldiers fanning out through the countryside were rounding up anybody they could find to fill a series of constantly moving labor camps.

Five-year-old Russ Zajtchuk, who was being raised by an aunt and uncle in the small Ukrainian village of Mokre, was caught in the turmoil of a dying Nazi Germany. In the final, desperate year of Hitler's Reich, Zajtchuk and his family got pushed from one camp to another across Poland and into Germany. The sights and sounds of those days of unrelenting anguish still burn vividly in Zajtchuk's memory today.

"We were made to dig ditches, pick potatoes. As the front moved, they moved us from camp to camp. We were called the Eastern Labor Force, and we had to wear little signs that said 'Ost'

(East), like the Jews had to wear the yellow stars of David," Zajtchuk recalled.

Once, Zajtchuk and his family found themselves sharing the dirty, straw-covered floor of a huge barn with 100 other families. A precocious child, Zajtchuk remembers playing chess with some of the people.

"One of my best friends was Jewish, and I used to play chess with him all the time," he said. "And then one day, he was gone. It was a big event in my life."



Photo courtesy of Russ Zajtchuk

A young Zajtchuk at a non-Jewish Ukrainian concentration camp near the end of World War II.

Even before they were forced from their homes, non-Jewish Ukrainian civilians had heard rumors of what the Nazis were doing to the Jews they captured. By the time Zajtchuk's family was forced into the labor camps, the rumor mill had painted some remarkably accurate pictures of Jews' fates in certain concentration camps scattered throughout Poland.

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"When we used to take a shower, the kids went with the women," Zajtchuk said. "I remember so well looking up at the shower heads and thinking what would happen if gas instead of water came out."

After the war, Zajtchuk remained with the only family he had—two aunts and an uncle. (His mother had died when he was a year old; his father had remarried and moved on.) They lived in a series of British-run camps for the displaced in Germany for six years. Finally, they were told they were being relocated to the United States. His uncle protested mightily, Zajtchuk remembers.

"He thought the U.S. was too far to go," he said. "He wanted to go to France. But the British told him he had no choice."

At Ellis Island, the family told immigration officials they had no relatives in America, but they did know a Ukrainian family in Chicago. Zajtchuk's family was promptly handed a few sandwiches and put on a train bound for Union Station with their belongings and their entire savings of \$20.

When on my cheek the zephyr wind does sting
When drops of salt have etched in flesh their tale
Of life's lament to life; then must we bring
Our thoughts downwind, where pausing we grow pale
In silent musings of human loss so great
Its memory with hungriest tooth will gnaw
Until the preying foe plucks at my fate
To leave me on the hollow Stygian shore
Alone, white-finger-tipped where I must stand
Alone with thought of all my loss; their death.
And slowly I reach out a salt-licked hand
And in my mind feel warm the loving bath.
Alone no more on death's embracing shore,
I hug life close; death's encompassing core.
(September, 1950)

Before he found his passion for medicine, Zajtchuk discovered his knack for writing poetry, a lifelong hobby.

Medical poetry

Growing up on Chicago's South Side today has its challenges; so it did in the early 1950s, especially for immigrant families who spoke no English. But with help from their one small link to their past, a family from Ukraine, they adapted to American life.

For schooling, Russ had little choice but to enroll—at the unlikely age of 12—in the first grade at local Wadsworth Elementary, where he mastered enough of the basics to finish the school's entire curriculum in nine months. He began fall semester of 1952 as a freshman at Hyde Park High School, practically within the shadow of the University of Chicago.

He recalled seeing the university campus for the first time, strolling by one day with a group of his best pals. He remarked at the beauty of the place, and mused about what a great school it must be.

"My Japanese friend laughed and said, 'Oh yes, it's a great school, but it's impossible to go there. You have to be rich and intelligent,'" Zajtchuk said, chuckling. "So, I said, 'Well, I guess that excludes me!'"

In truth, Zajtchuk said he remembers feeling no disillusionment at his friend's remark. With his family still quite poor, he'd never taken the idea of going to the university seriously anyway. But the idea of continuing his education after high school appealed to him, and after graduation Zajtchuk was able to enroll at the then two-year program offered by nearby University of Illinois-Chicago.

His first year there, Zajtchuk discovered a surprising interest—poetry. Though his academic track record showed aptitudes in math and science clearly beyond any in the humanities, Zajtchuk found a passion—and a knack—for writing poems. When some of his work was published in a school anthology, it caught the attention of a physician who worked in the school's health center. Helen Kostka, MD, soon befriended Zajtchuk. To her surprise, she learned about his true ambition: The young poet wanted to be a doctor.

A family health crisis during his freshman year in college sealed Zajtchuk's interest in a career in medicine. When, at Zajtchuk's urging, his uncle had his lungs X-rayed by a city-run mobile health unit, a spot was discovered. Doctors diagnosed lung cancer and told his uncle he had three months to live. Zajtchuk urged his uncle to get a second opinion, which he did, and after surgery, his uncle lived another 25 years. The experience changed Zajtchuk's life as well.

"I thought that as a doctor, I could maybe provide service to people, something that might give me great joy," he said. "That's why I decided to go into medicine."

Repaying a debt

His accidental friendship with Kostka in 1956 led directly to a successful interview with her friend, Joseph J. Ceithaml, dean of admissions at Chicago's medical school, who arranged a scholarship for the earnest young student. After earning an MD in 1963, he plunged right back into school for post-graduate training in cardiothoracic surgery. In '69, he was welcomed at his alma mater as an assistant professor, and within a year, Zajtchuk was well into a life of academic medicine.

Still, something gnawed at his soul.

"I felt like I wanted to serve my country," he said. "I figured the United States gave me all this opportunity, so I should give something back."

Zajtchuk recalled with a smile how he broke the news to his wife Joan, whom he'd met 10 years earlier in med school. At the time, Joan was finishing up residency training in head and neck surgery.

"I called her up and said, 'Hey, I got a real deal for you. If you join the Army, we can both go to Vietnam.' She thought I was crazy," he said.

That's how Zajtchuk found himself bouncing around Vietnam and witnessing first hand the blood-pounding chaos of battlefield medicine. What he saw changed him forever. Despite the awe-inspiring bravery and dedication of the medevac personnel he worked with, Zajtchuk saw much room for

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Zajtchuk and his wife joined the service in 1971 and began their military careers by serving at the Army's Third Field Hospital in Saigon.



improvement in the system. "I felt that the technology wasn't advanced enough, that we could do better," he said. "That's why I stayed in the military: to see if I could make the system better."

Working from their base in the Army's Third Field (24th Evac) Hospital in Saigon, he and Joan spent 1971 teaching and practicing medicine in South Vietnam. To this day, the couple maintains strong ties with Vietnamese friends they made there. "We learned a lot from them," Zajtchuk said. "Like how to accept hardships, and what's really important in life and what isn't."

Once back stateside, the Zajtchuks saw their initial two-year Army stint evolve

At Fort Detrick, Zajtchuk solidified his stature as one of the world's foremost experts on telemedicine—literally the delivery of health care at a distance. In those dusty, chaotic evacuation scenes he witnessed in Vietnam, Zajtchuk had foreseen the battlefield medicine of the future, where on-site medics instantly receive expert information via electronic communication with specialists hundreds, even thousands of miles away. Since then, information technology has helped telemedicine become a robust health care discipline unto itself.

"We've projected that if we'd had the technologies we have now, we would have had about 20,000 fewer deaths in Vietnam," Zajtchuk said.

Zajtchuk serves as an unpaid consultant to the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Defense and other federal agencies in the areas of biological and chemical warfare and counter-terrorism; he chairs the National Academy of Sciences' Biological Terrorism Committee. Prodded, he gives tantalizing hints about the nation's strategy for defending against germ warfare: "We're trying to be very vigilant, and one of the ways to stay vigilant is to interdict things before they happen. And you recruit people who are friends of ours to help us succeed."



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—Zajtchuk

easily into full-blown military careers. What had begun as something of a whim for the young, childless couple had now grown deep roots, and suddenly Zajtchuk's Vietnam experience (which earned him numerous decorations, including the Bronze Star) showed promise for making a real difference in how emergency medicine in the nation's military was done.

For the next 28 years, the Zajtchuks served in various leadership posts around the country, particularly at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Zajtchuk left Reed in 1991 as deputy commander to become commander at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. For three years beginning in 1995, he served as commanding general and post commander at the Army's Medical Research and Materiel Command at Fort Detrick, Md.

Full measure

Retirement for Russ Zajtchuk these days simply means a smooth downshifting into other gears. His plate remains full, both in service to medicine (as a professor of surgery at George Washington University's Medical Center) and to country.

Throughout his career, Zajtchuk has been a keen student not only of information technology and its application to medicine, but also of one of the most sinister developments in modern warfare—biological and chemical weapons. As a kid trapped in Nazi labor camps, watching people die daily from typhus and other communicable diseases made a powerful impression on Zajtchuk. As a consequence, he has devoted much of his career to teaching and writing about bioterrorism and has become a highly sought after national resource on the subject.

But for all his time spent professionally analyzing doom-and-gloom scenarios that need not preoccupy the average citizen, Zajtchuk wears a smile and gets downright

excited over what he predicts for the future of medicine.

"Within 20 years, you'll be able to go through a [diagnostic] tunnel, and come out with a complete diagnosis of all your problems—whether you've got a tumor, what kind it is, other metabolic problems, things you haven't even thought of," he said. "I may not live to see that, but it will definitely happen."

Meanwhile, Zajtchuk and wife Joan, a professor emerita from Rush University Medical Center, continue enjoying each other's company, which they've kept now for 45 years.

"What do I do for fun? Ah, I still write poetry," he said. "That and looking at the ocean, and thanking God I've lived long enough to see the beauty in this world, and to live in this country."