

Stouffville Home To Children Of Cold War

By Ben Embiricos

If you are too young to remember the Second World War but old enough to remember bell bottom jeans, then the Cold War was probably the international political backdrop for your childhood.

As I explained to my nine-year-old son recently, the Cold War was not a battle for market share between two ice cream companies. In all seriousness, even for those old enough to remember, it is very easy to underestimate how different things were not that long ago. For those born more recently it is probably hard to imagine.

In the 1970s and 1980s when I was a kid growing up in the UK, the only terrorists who were really on the British radar were those from Northern Ireland. Instead it was all about the Russians, the East European bloc and the wider communist world - "the Red Menace".

The fear of a third world war featuring nuclear weapons was a constant backdrop to an ideological slug fest between east and west. In "free Europe" the proximity of Eastern Europe added another notch of fear. I remember when I was about twelve or thirteen being given a flyer that claimed to show what would happen if a nuclear bomb was dropped in the centre of my hometown. Obviously it wasn't pretty.

At school we studied the Welsh language. I remember that one of the phrases in my school textbook was "What is your opinion on unilateral nuclear disarmament?" I can't remember what this phrase was in Welsh or any of the suggested responses. It was next to the more timeless and less controversial "Did you see the game last night?" To the latter question I remember "gem gyfartal" (tied game) was one of the possible responses.

The east versus west battle added a dimension to sports, the arts and many other aspects of life. Olympics were boycotted, Russian musicians defected. Spy novels and Bond films were full of communist "bad guys." There was even a Cold War *Rocky!* (*Rocky IV*, I believe, with Dolph Lundgren playing the Soviet boxer). Even chess was considered a spectator sport if a Russian was involved.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a sudden and dramatic end to this era. I was 18 years old and had just started a geography degree at Oxford. It was an exciting time, with the world seemingly having been turned on its head.

Writing essays about events that had only been reported in newspapers and popular

magazines was tricky. I remember once quoting extensively from a Time magazine commemorative supplement. My professor was not impressed. I can still recall his comments in the margin of my essay: "cliché." "son of cliché." "cliché-rides again." He was tough, but at least he had a sense of humour.

While the world has changed enormously since 1989, in the lives of many it feels like not so long ago.

In the seven years I have lived in Canada I have been lucky enough to find my way to Stouffville, a great community to raise kids and the friendliest place that I have ever lived. We live in an older neighbourhood surrounded mostly by relatively long term residents, but we have also got to know a lot of the newer residents through our kids' attending school, play groups and sports activities.

For me one of the interesting features of the "new Stouffville" has been hearing the stories of some residents who lived in communist Eastern Europe.

Cornel Flintoaca was born in communist Romania in 1954. His daughter Louziana and her husband Gabriel Ion moved to Stouffville in 2006. They now have a one-year-old daughter. Cornel and his wife Katalin continue to live in Romania but visited Stouffville recently to stay with the local branch of their family.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Cornel during his visit. His daughter Louziana acted as translator as well as sharing some of her own memories of growing up during the Cold War. In some ways theirs is a universal story about how times and places change while families keep on going. But it is also a historical account.

Property was being confiscated and there were brushes with secret police informants, but the state provided free post-secondary education, a guaranteed job and a free apartment for every young couple. The streets were crime free, but schoolchildren were being beaten by their principal for disrespecting Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, and you had to watch what you said in public.

I have spent much of my allotted space writing about why I find tales of Communist Eastern Europe so fascinating. I have only hinted at Cornel's story. Next issue we shall fully dive in!

This is the first of a two-part feature on memories of life in Romania during the Cold War.



Cornel Flintoaca (left) with wife Katalin, son in law Gabriel Ion and granddaughter Cristina visiting the play group at St. James' Presbyterian Church in Stouffville. Ben Embiricos photo

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