

SWIMMING FOR FREEDOM

Indiana Masters Swimmer Recalls Ultimate Distance Journey

>>> by Raena Alexis Latina

Born and raised in Sofia, Bulgaria, Dimitar Kalchev was just over a year old when his country lost its freedom as communists came to power under the influence of the Russian army. It was 1945. As a boy, Kalchev witnessed many Bulgarians

A member of the Noblesville Adult Swim Team Inc. since 2002, Raena Alexis Latina is a free-lance writer based in Indianapolis.

who opposed the new rule, some vigorously, such as his father.

“In my early youth, I did not

want to know much about the politics,” says Kalchev. “But I could see well how the communist system worked. My brother, Stoyan, and I saw my parents and grandparents lose their properties, which were confiscated.”

During this time, Kalchev observed countless others undergo harassment, arrest, interrogation and prosecution.

“Under communism, you work

where you are told,” Kalchev says, with a small shrug of his shoulders. “You know that the secret militia can break down your door any time they like. One cannot even change residence without permission.”

Kalchev, who spent two years in Bulgaria’s compulsory military service after graduating from high school, loved sports and possessed a natural athleticism. He also had a passion for aviation—airplane model building, skydiving and flying.

But Kalchev first felt the impact of the communist system with the rejection of his admission to an aviation-oriented higher education program. “I was in excellent health and a very good athlete, but I ‘failed’ my physical exam,” he says. Soon after, he was expelled from the flying club.

“I showed up one day and they said, ‘You are disallowed to fly,’” Kalchev recalls. Repeated inquiries for explanation went unanswered.

“In college,” Kalchev says, “if you have high grades, you can apply to study abroad. I qualified for both Russia and Czechoslovakia, but I couldn’t obtain permission.” He also received a rejection for a request to vacation in Yugoslavia.

“It became very obvious that information in my personal file was working against me,” Kalchev says.

He was, however, accepted to an engineering school and graduated after five years. “But this was a professional life

that...quashes initiative. It could only drive me to conflict with authorities. I had to be free to express myself. I decided to leave my native land,” he says.

The borders of Bulgaria were literally surrounded by fences and barbed wire. Armed soldiers stationed every few hundred yards kept watch around the clock. An escape attempt via land was simply too dangerous.

Kalchev considered building a battery-powered, miniature submarine. “In a country where we couldn’t get the supplies and where everything is watched, I had to abandon this idea,” he says. Next, he studied all he could about balloons, contemplating building a helium- or hydrogen-filled craft. Again, technical difficulties, coupled with the risk of discovery, necessitated finding a better method of escape.

This method was swimming.

Accessible beaches on the Bulgarian shoreline were approximately nine miles from the Turkish border. Kalchev began to devise a plan for swimming the distance between the mouth of the Veleka River on the Bulgarian Black Sea, south along the coast to the Turkish border.

Although the border of Greece was closer—five or six miles across the Crete Lake—that path was too risky. “They [Turkey] would not send you back [to Bulgaria],” Kalchev says. “Greece, I heard stories that they would send you back. It had to be Turkey.”

“A couple of years and a few

When **DIMITAR KALCHEV** swam out of Bulgaria in 1971, he carried nothing but a compass, a watch and a waterproof pouch—taped to his body—containing documents.



hundred hours of swim training later, I was ready to escape to freedom,” he says.

Kalchev also spent several months learning as much as he could about the border security measures along the shore. North of Veleka, guards patrolled for unusual activity. South of the river, watchtower soldiers vigilantly scanned the sea with electronic and sonic equipment. At night, they used powerful searchlights that reached far off shore. Guard dogs, cutter boats and helicopters completed the border patrol.

After repeated observation, Kalchev realized that his best chance would be to attempt the nine-mile swim at night. To prepare, he trained, and trained, and trained.

“I was a bit of a track star—running and high jump,” Kalchev says. “After college, my company had sports. And I was a good athlete; I won what I entered. This was good with the company, and they gave me access to a 50-meter pool. Of course, they didn’t know what I was planning.” In fact, nobody in Bulgaria knew of his impending plans.

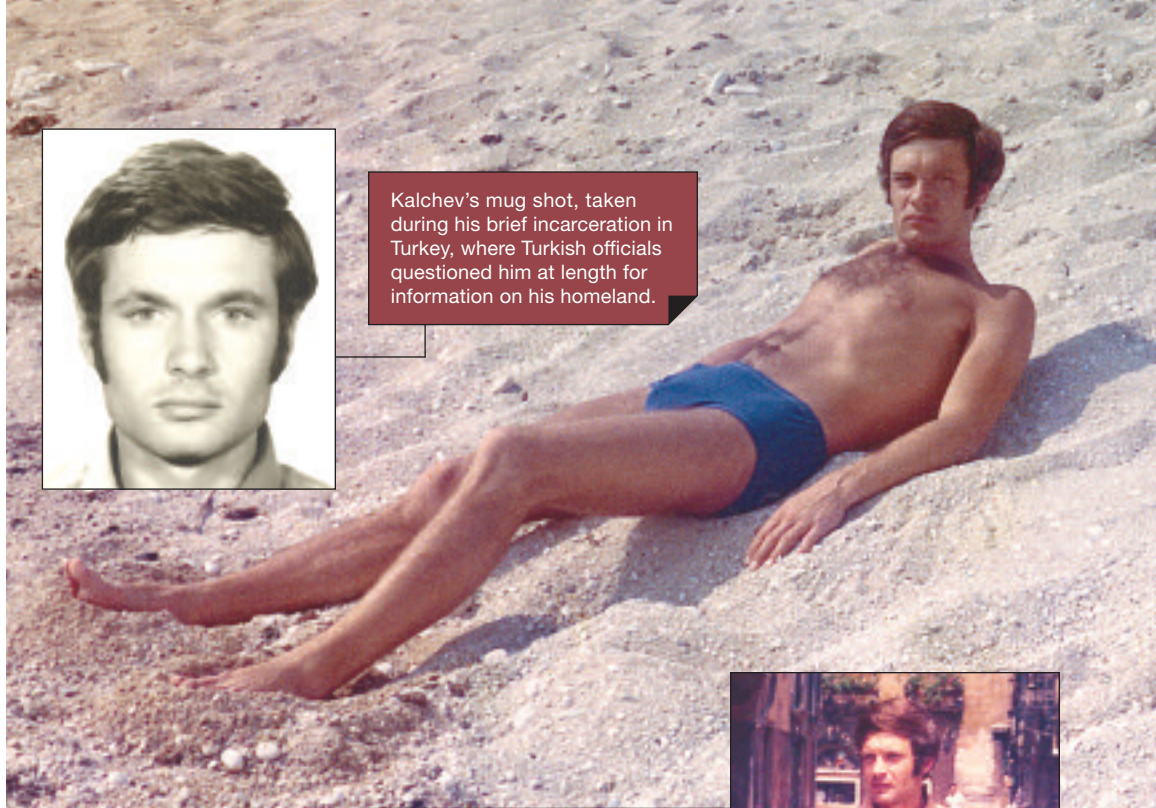
With a focus on time, rather than speed, Kalchev increased his training. Sometimes he swam twice a day, both in the pool and in the cold waters of the Black Sea.

“People used to say to me ‘we cannot believe what motivates you to swim so much,’ and I would just shrug,” he says. “For most of the first year, the water [of the Black Sea] was so cold that I couldn’t do more than an hour. Then, after a while, I could do four or five hours.”

Twice, friends outside of Bulgaria tried to send him a wetsuit. “One friend was in East Germany,” Kalchev recalls. “We thought maybe they wouldn’t look at a package from there, but the government didn’t allow it.”

On Aug. 8, 1971, as the sun began its evening descent, Kalchev approached his hidden launch site.

“Starting that early, while it was light, was risky,” he notes.



Kalchev’s mug shot, taken during his brief incarceration in Turkey, where Turkish officials questioned him at length for information on his homeland.

“But I had to go then to reach Turkey before dawn. The summer nights are short and the swimming distance was considerable.”

Before entering the water, he froze for a heart-stopping moment as a shadowy figure, potentially an armed guard, approached the hiding place. But the figure passed.

Clad only in swim trunks and without the aid of a wetsuit, Kalchev quickly greased his body with a homemade ointment—to give some protection against heat loss—and slipped into the water.

“I remember that ointment,” he says. “I learned that the best thing to keep warm would be to use bone marrow, but I couldn’t find a good source.” Kalchev tried obtaining marrow at several restaurants, but couldn’t amass enough without raising suspicions. He finally concocted a homemade mixture of Nivea cream and oils.

The only other items Kalchev carried were a compass, a watch and a small package of documents taped to his body. “I used the bladder, the insides, from a soccer ball to waterproof it,” Kalchev explains. The package contained his engineering diploma and other documents, a

Following his release from prison, Kalchev lived in Turkey for six months and Italy for six months before entering the United States as a “person without country.”

pilot’s log book and some money.

Kalchev’s first strokes took him east, away from the coast. Then, giving the immediate search tower a wide berth, he turned south, moving to a fast freestyle stroke and staying parallel to the shoreline.

The evening skies did not stay dark for long as the powerful searchlights sprang to life, eyeing the waves. As their path approached, Kalchev submerged his head. With dismay, he realized the intensity of the beams.

“I could see my body through the water like it was daytime,” Kalchev says. “But I put my face down and tried to be inconspicuous. I had to hide that way many times through the night as I continued to swim.

“I could not see the land but I did not have to—the search lights were there,” he notes. The compass gave him a general orientation, as did the moon.

Although the sea was not particularly calm, Kalchev’s months of training in similar conditions had prepared him well. However, after about three hours in the water, the cold began



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to take root. After about five hours, it gripped his body as he tried to keep his mind focused.

"The next three hours were the greatest difficulty," Kalchev says. "But I forgot about the cold when I spotted the dark silhouette of a coast guard cutter boat passing slowly." Fortunately, the boat continued on its path.

Cutter boats and searchlights were not Kalchev's only concerns. "I was afraid of the jellyfish," he recalls. "My friend had been stung in the eye and it caused him great difficulty. I swam most of the time with one eye closed. I got a few stings, but it is common."

With exhaustion at hand, only the splashing waves and relentless searchlights distracted Kalchev from the cold, long night. Sheer determination pushed his strokes forward. As dawn approached, Kalchev knew that he must be close to Turkey. After about 11 hours in the water, he saw the flickering lights of a border village. Heartened, he swam a little far-

ther and turned west. Soon, with the touch of sand under his feet, Kalchev took his first steps into the free world.

"I left behind my native land, but I got my freedom, which I value now more than anything," Kalchev affirms.

Cold and disoriented, Kalchev stumbled onto a farm and literally passed out from exhaustion in a haystack. He woke sometime later to the sounds of a man shouting at him.

"It took me a moment to remember that I was basically naked," Kalchev says. "But he was speaking Turkish, not Bulgarian, so that was a good sign. I made it."

Kalchev spent two days in a local jail before being transported to Istanbul. Other acquaintances who had previously escaped from Bulgaria had informed the Turkish officials of Kalchev's plans, which helped in his processing.

"I was there [Istanbul] for 10 days in that jail, or maybe a

week,' he notes. "Some people spend months there. I had a cell with a little stove. It was full of cigarette butts. All I could think was that was very bad news, to be there so long as to fill up the stove with that many cigarette butts. But I was actually very lucky. They wanted information, so I told them everything I could. They liked me. I even got a mosquito net to keep out the bugs."

After his release from jail, Kalchev spent six months in Turkey and another six months in Italy. Then, designated as a "person without country," he applied for entry to the United States.

Without knowing a word of English, Kalchev arrived in New York in 1972. He stayed with a friend and enrolled in English as a second language classes, which he took each morning, afternoon and evening. Already proficient in French and Russian, Kalchev could speak English in two months.



Photos: Peter Bick

TAKING THE POLAR BEAR PLUNGE

There are various ways to celebrate the start of a new year: champagne toasts, singing old songs, watching TV or—if you're a member of the Noblesville (IN) Adult Swim Team Inc.—jumping into a freezing lake. Those who choose to do the latter become official members of the Polar Bear Club.

On Jan. 1, 2005, after a fun practice of 105 x 25s, eight members of the NASTIs took a detour to nearby Morse Lake for the team's Tenth Annual Polar Bear Plunge, before joining the rest of their teammates for a pitch-in luncheon.

"It's an exhilarating way to begin a new year," says Dick Sidner, founding member of the NASTI Polar Bear Club.

For nine years, swimmers jumped from a dock at the house of team coach Doug Church. This year, dock repairs caused the group to move to the home of teammate Linda Petit. For 2006, the Plunge has found a permanent launch site at Dick Sidner's new waterside residence.

To commemorate their chilly endeavor, Polar Bear Club members receive a certificate documenting the water and air temperatures, general weather conditions and the names of fellow swimmers who also took the plunge.



Photo: Randy Grutchfield

Jumping into a 30-foot-deep lake to start 2005 with a shiver were: (back row) Ralph Dixon, Lisa Miller, Bill Schleifman, (front row) David Busche, Jean Gileno, Raena Alexis Latina, Kirk Dixon and Dimitar Kalchev, who, unlike his teammates who jumped in and quickly exited, dove out about 10 yards into the lake and leisurely swam back.

NASTI member Jean Gileno celebrated her first day with the team by becoming a Polar Bear Club member. "I did it to make 2005 memorable," she says. "And also because of a little peer pressure!"

A few local newspapers covered the group's submersion in the "pleasant" 36-degree water, providing a great plug for Masters swimming.

—Raena Alexis Latina

Shortly thereafter, he was once again employed as an engineer.

Job opportunities led Kalchev to San Diego. With an entirely different mindset, he returned to open water swimming. "I loved it. I did it whenever I got a chance," he says.

While in San Diego, Kalchev met his future wife, Bonnie, whom he married in 1988, at age 45. In 1994, a job transfer led the Kalchevs and their daughter, Christina, now 12, to Indianapolis.

Never too long away from swimming, Kalchev found his way to the Natatorium. "For quite a while," he recalls, "I bought the passes for the public to swim, but I was never that serious, and parking became expensive!"

He then discovered the pool at Noblesville High School, just north of Indianapolis. "I would go to the high school with my daughter during public swim. I used to run, but I stopped due to a foot injury. Swimming was better for me."



Kalchev moved to Indianapolis in 1994 and now swims with the Noblesville Adult Swim Team (NASTI).

was funny is that he talked like it was an everyday occurrence, no big deal.”

Doug Church, NASTI coach and USMS treasurer, describes Kalchev as very unassuming and unfailingly enthusiastic. “His personal story is extremely inspiring. When you compare your swimming life to his, it is just amazing.”

Last year Kalchev was able to return to Bulgaria, where he finally had the chance to look through the government dossier compiled on his father.

“I couldn’t believe the lies in there,” he laments. “You know, when I left, I had feared for my family. My brother, he was a physicist, a Ph.D. He really paid the price for my escape. It

Kalchev met his wife, **BONNIE**, while living in San Diego. Their daughter, **CHRISTINA**, is 12.



ended his career. It was hard between us for a while. He is still over there.”

Although Bulgaria has regained its independence, Kalchev’s life and happiness are now in the United States. “From Communism to Hoosier-ism to NASTI-ism—he is a real American (and swimming) success story,” says fellow Masters swimmer Eric Carstensen.

This past Jan. 1, Kalchev celebrated the beginning of

another year of freedom with the NASTI annual Polar Bear Plunge. While other teammates jumped in at the ladder and exited as quickly as possible, Kalchev, at age 61, dove into the 36-degree water of Morse Reservoir and calmly swam several strokes back to the dock. His teammates cheered. <<<



Photos: Peter Bick