

A DOCTOR WIT

BERTRAM ZARINS, MD '67, CAPS HIS LONGSTANDING SUPPORT OF MEDICAL CARE IN LATVIA WITH A MEDICAL MISSION TO UKRAINE.

In December 2024, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine continued to rage, Bertram Zarins, MD '67, traveled to the front lines of the conflict to deliver critically needed medical supplies to the Ukrainian military.

"We were within two kilometers of the Russian border," says Dr. Zarins. "We could hear artillery fire."

The week-long medical mission was the latest in the 81-year-old physician's three-decade effort to support medical care in Latvia, his native country, as well as the training of Latvian physicians.

Zarins' family fled Latvia in October 1944 when the Russians invaded Latvia a second time at the end of World War II. He was two years old. "Russians were killing the intelligentsia, and our family was on the list to be deported to Siberia or killed," he says. "There was a mad scramble to get out. My family went to the shore, and we were fortunate to escape on a little fishing boat."

Although Zarins has no memory of the event, he is forever grateful for the assistance his family received in reaching safety and eventually immigrating to the United States.

Zarins went on to become a pioneer in the field of arthroscopic surgery. He now serves as the first Augustus Thorndike Clinical Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Harvard Medical School. He is the Emeritus Chief of Sports Medicine at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and was head team physician for three professional sports teams: the New England Patriots for 25 years, the Boston Bruins for 32 years, and the New England Revolution soccer team for 14 years. Zarins was also head physician for the United States at the Winter Olympic games in Sarajevo in 1984. His younger brother, Christopher K. Zarins, MD, is also a distinguished physician, holding an appointment as Chief of Vascular Surgery Emeritus and the Walter Clifford Chidester and Elsa Rooney Chidester Professor of Surgery at Stanford University.

In 1990, the brothers established the Latvian Medical Foundation (LMF). The following year they helped

the newly independent Latvia with emergency medical aid. As the medical crisis abated, the organization began focusing on fellowships that allow young Latvian doctors to study and train abroad with the goal of improving medical care in the country.

All that changed in 2022, when the Russians invaded Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees flooded into Latvia. Once again, the organization turned its focus to emergency humanitarian aid. Over the next three years, the LMF provided financial support to more than 150 Ukrainian medical professionals who had settled in Latvia. The LMF has covered costs of medical care for injured Ukrainian soldiers in Latvia, and the training of Ukrainian medical specialists in anesthesiology and microsurgery.

In December 2024, Bertram Zarins organized a team of Latvian volunteers to go to Ukraine. The LMF paid for two ambulances and two medical evacuation vehicles, which they filled with medical equipment. They delivered the payload to three Ukrainian hospitals and to soldiers defending Ukraine at the front.

The hands-on experience provided a particularly meaningful opportunity to give back. "There have been a tremendous number of civilian casualties, including children," he says. "The suffering is immense, and the medical need is great. Anything we can do to alleviate that, and to help Ukraine fight for its existence, is important."

The mission began in Riga, the capital of Latvia, where a team of Latvian doctors and volunteers assembled and loaded the medical supplies into the vehicles. In preparation, advance work was done to identify the needs in hospitals and at the front. As a result, generators and power banks were included, as well as tourniquets.

The Latvian team drove the vehicles and supplies from Riga to Warsaw, Poland, where Bertram and Christopher Zarins joined the caravan. The mission lasted from December 8-14, 2024.

Zarins says they passed lines of trucks at the border

WITHOUT BORDERS



Drs. Christopher and Bertram Zarins delivering aid from the Latvian Medical Foundation to the front in Ukraine

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from Poland to Ukraine that were filled with aid for Ukraine. They were backed up for up to ten kilometers, many waiting for days to cross. It took the Latvian team four hours to make the crossing.

The first stop was dropping supplies at the Lviv Regional Children's Hospital, followed by the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional Clinical Hospital. The team then split into two groups, with the Latvian physicians continuing to Vinnytsia City Clinical Emergency Hospital and the Zarins, along with experienced Latvian volunteer guides, traveling to Kupiansk to deliver equipment and medical supplies to the front.

The distance from Lviv to Kharakiv is about 700 miles. "We passed through many areas where there was no electricity," says Zarins. They drove further to Kupi-



Members of the Latvian mission team deliver donations to the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional Clinical Hospital, December 9, 2024

ansk, an almost abandoned border city whose buildings have been destroyed by bombs and repeated shelling. “The destruction we witnessed was widespread.”

When the team got close to the front, a Ukrainian soldier met them and drove them further in his military vehicle. The soldier gave them helmets and protective vests. He also took them to a Ukrainian military drone workshop.

“It was an experience I will not forget,” says Zarins.

The trip concluded in Kiev, where they visited the Latvian Embassy. The director of the Main Ukrainian Military Hospital in Kiev gave each of the Zarins a commemorative coin for their courage and for their support of the defenders of Ukraine.

Bertram Zarins first returned to his homeland in 1987, when he was invited to speak at an All-Soviet medical conference in Riga. It was an emotional experience to return to where he came from and to meet his relatives. He was saddened to see the very low standard of medical care in his home country.

Zarins got the idea to organize a conference in Riga similar to the one he had just attended but for Latvian doctors. He recruited 250 Latvian doctors and their families in the Free World and chartered an airplane to fly the group from Helsinki to Riga. This was the first



international flight to land in Latvia since the end of World War II.

The resultant first Latvian World Congress in Medicine was held in Riga in June 1989. The Congress opened with a parade—6,000 people marched from the old city of Riga to the Freedom Monument, where they placed

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flowers. They proceeded to the Riga Sports Palace for the opening ceremony. What was billed as a medical conference became a freedom movement for Latvia. "It was similar to what the dockworkers did in Poland, except in Latvia it was the doctors," Zarins says. "The Congress was a catalyst for Latvia's crusade for freedom. One and a half years later, Latvia was free."

The Zarins' used income generated from the meeting to establish the LMF. When Latvia regained its freedom from the Soviet Union, its medical system collapsed. The LMF mobilized emergency aid, sending medicines and medical devices to Latvia. The LMF assisted Project Hope in organizing a shipment of medical supplies to Latvia from the United States. Vice President Dan Quayle went to Riga with a full cargo plane in February 1992. Bertram Zarins donated many arthroscopy devices and Christopher Zarins introduced new techniques and donated vascular devices.

By 1993, the medical crisis abated and LMF began supporting hospitals and professional medical organizations. They helped the Children's Hospital in Riga establish a program to provide prosthetic limbs for children. Another program supported nursing education. The LMF funded an electronic medical library at the main teaching hospital in Riga. The organization has supported postgraduate medical education for 25 years. The Zarins Traveling Fellowship awards postgraduate scholarships each year for up to five recent medical graduates to study abroad. The first fellow, orthopaedic surgeon Valdis Zatlers, used the LMF fellowship to learn arthroscopy. Dr. Zatlers was elected president of Latvia in 2007.

In 2004, Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga awarded the Three Star Medal of Honor to Zarins. It is the highest civilian honor in Latvia.

It's one of many honors Zarins has garnered during his career. He was named Physician of the Year by the National Football League in 2002 and has six Super Bowl rings, a Stanley Cup ring, an Olympic ring, and several American Football Conference rings.

Since 1989, he has visited Latvia annually to provide humanitarian assistance and/or teach doctors, residents, and medical students.



In 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle delivered a shipment of medical supplies to Latvia that was organized by the Latvian Medical Foundation in collaboration with Project Hope. Christopher Zarins is behind his right shoulder and Bertram Zarins behind the left.

Retired from clinical practice since 2020, Zarins now devotes time to writing. Last year he published *Surgical Anatomy and Exposures of the Knee: A Surgical Atlas*. He is currently working on a similar book on the shoulder.

And he continues to monitor the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. "Latvian doctors continue to provide reconstructive microsurgery assistance to hospitals in Ukraine," he says. "The war continues and will need support for all those who suffer the hardest of it." ■

