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A 65-Year Wait for an Apartment and TV

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Mikhail Mogilnichenko, 85, weeping as he recounts his baptism of fire in the Battle of Kursk. Mogilnichenko just received the apartment promised to him for his World War II service. **Vladimir Filonov**

Mikhail Mogilnichenko, 85, does not like to wear his war decorations because he says it would look like he were showing off, even though he has every right to do so as a combat veteran.

A more practical — though belated — reward was finally bestowed on Mogilnichenko a few weeks ago. The veteran is now preparing to move into a new apartment provided by City Hall.

The apartment came as a surprise. Mogilnichenko said he had not expected the government to fulfill its promise.

"Many years have passed, and I have received a present I never thought of receiving," Mogilnichenko said in an interview. "It's very good for me. The apartment is nice and convenient, so I'm very glad and satisfied."

Mogilnichenko is among thousands of World War II veterans who were promised housing by

President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. To qualify, the veterans had to have registered for a waiting list before March 1, 2005, when a new Housing Code went into effect.

Families of deceased veterans also were eligible for apartments, and Medvedev later promised that soldiers who missed the 2005 deadline would be covered as well, although some have been left out of the program.

The deadline for veterans to receive their apartments was May 1, just days before this weekend's celebrations commemorating the 65th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Mogilnichenko was put on the waiting list in 2000, when he moved in with his son's family in Moscow from his home village, Vorontsovka, in the Voronezh region. The veteran has not seen his new apartment yet because a wartime leg wound makes it hard for him to walk. But he knows from his son that it is a two-room, 53-square-meter renovated apartment in a residential complex in northern Moscow.

The veteran said he would pay his first visit to the new apartment on Victory Day — May 9 — and move there together with his grandson by the end of the month.

City Hall also has awarded Mogilnichenko with a 65th anniversary medal and given him a new television set.

Mogilnichenko, who was sent to the frontline in 1943 at the age of 18, wept as he recalled his baptism of fire in the Battle of Kursk, a turning point of World War II and the last German strategic offensive on the Eastern Front.

"I was very scared when I first saw the Germans, I started trembling. I thought, ‘What can I do to them if they are so tall,’" he said, drying tears with a napkin.

Later, Mogilnichenko was part of the Soviet force that pursued the retreating Germans, and he served as a scout on the border of Belarus and Poland, gathering information about enemy forces.

In 1944, he received a severe leg wound in the battle of Koenigsberg in East Prussia.

"It was a penetrating bullet wound. The leg was broken here," Mogilnichenko said, pointing to his left leg above the knee.

"I thought that I would not survive, the pain was terrible," he said.

Mogilnichenko spent six months in the hospital and finished the war working in military logistics, eventually returning home to the Voronezh region.

Housing for Mogilnichenko and other veterans have cost the government 89.2 billion rubles ($2.9 billion), Regional Development Minister Viktor Basargin said Wednesday. All 28,494 veterans put on the waiting list before the 2005 deadline have received apartments, Basargin said.

The ministry had also requested 20.6 billion rubles of the 70 billion rubles estimated to be required to provide new housing for veterans who were put on the waiting list after March 1,

2005, Basargin said in April.

The number of veterans not included in the 2005 list but eligible for new apartments currently amounts to 84,322 and may reach 140,000, Basargin said.

He promised that 90 percent of veterans who missed being included in the waiting list on time would receive apartments this year, and he said Wednesday that 5,437 of those had already received new housing.

City Hall said it had provided apartments for 1,019 veterans and families of those deceased.

This does not mean, however, that the government has provided new housing for all veterans of World War II. A veteran is eligible for a new apartment only if the living space per person in his or her current housing is 10 square meters or less.

Svetlana Kirsanova, 71, a survivor of the Siege of Leningrad, a status considered equal to a war veteran, is currently living in a 35-square-meter, one-room apartment in Moscow with her son and 7-year-old granddaughter.

Kirsanova was 2 years old when the siege started, and had to subsist on 125 grams of bread a day.

Kirsanova has been trying to get a new apartment for five years, but the City Hall's housing policy department had refused to grant her request, saying space per person in her current housing exceeds the norm by almost 2 square meters.

Kirsanova said she had to live in the 9.6-square-meter kitchen, while her son and granddaughter occupied a 19-square-meter room.

"But what's a 9-square-meter kitchen if there are also all the household appliances there?" she said.

A letter sent by Kirsanova to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was forwarded to the housing policy department, she said.

The Prosecutor General's Office plans a nationwide check in the second half of 2010 to see if the housing for veterans has been provided, Prosecutor General Yury Chaika said last week. Authorities in a number of regions were slow to provide veterans with new apartments, he said.

There were 677,898 surviving World War II veterans in Russia as of Jan. 1.

The Moscow Times received a letter last week from Ivan Svishchev, 88, who fought in defense forces of Leningrad.

Svishchev, who lives in the Penza region, said local authorities refused to provide him with new housing because the total space of the house he is currently sharing with his wife is 53.4 square meters.

The house has no running water and no central heating. The toilet is located in the yard.

Svishchev said he had complained to regional and Moscow officials and politicians, including Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky, but received nothing except runarounds.

"The head of the local administration should think how an elderly person lives in winter without gas heating, with only a stove. It is necessary to buy firewood ... and to save every slab in order not to die of severe frost," Svishchev said.

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