

ANNI

ANNI DYCK KESSENICH (1926-)

Based on two interviews with Anne-Marie Nakhla
Nov. 30, 1996 & Oct. 24, 2016

ANNI ♦ Fragile Beginnings & A Hungry Childhood

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Fragile Beginnings & A Hungry Childhood

My first memory is from when I was three. It was 1929, and my father had already died. I was playing outside by myself, swinging on the branch of a tree. My mom was visiting with a bunch of ladies on the porch; they were watching me play and talking about me. My mom said, “Anni was born prematurely. She came two months early. The midwife told me, ‘That baby won’t live through the night.’ Anni was so little that we put her in a shoe box under the bed to let her die. In the morning, though, she was still grunting, so I decided to give her something to eat.” I thought many times about that story and my fragile beginning.

As a child growing up facing starvation, Anni collected weeds like wild sorrel (left) and wild onions (right) for her family to eat.



One thing I remember from my childhood is having nothing to eat. We were hungry all the time. The communists took everything away from us in 1929, the year my father died and collectivization started. From that point on, my family had nothing.

My sister and brothers all had to work on the *kolkhoz* (collective farm). Very early in the morning, before they left for work, they went to get their daily ration. It was usually just a handful of flour, but it was their only pay at that time.

My job as a little girl was to collect wild weeds from the hills behind our house. Very early each morning, I would run out to collect onions, sorrel (a sour-tasting leaf), and loddage (a very big-leaf) from those hills. I’d bring these home and give

them to Mom, and she’d make a soup from the weeds that I brought and the flour from my brothers and sisters. She’d fry it in a pan for us to eat.

Everybody had to work, including my mom, so I went to kindergarten. I didn’t like it there, and sometimes I ran home early. Once, on the way home, I found a potato growing. I dug underneath it and found three baby potatoes. I ate them all, then put the earth back around the large potato, hoping that Mom wouldn’t notice that the other potatoes were missing.

I remember *always* being hungry. Having nothing to eat was a normal part of life, especially since my dad had died and my mother was left with seven children. Whenever there was still a husband or a father around, that family seemed to fare a little better than ours did. We were pretty poor.

School Days Under Communist Teachers

I liked going to school. I got good grades and excelled.

In school, we were all encouraged to join Pioneers, the club that trained us to be communists. If you were a Pioneer, you wore a red tie. One day, our teacher had us all wear red ties home. When I came in wearing that tie, my Grandma took one look and said, “Oh, that poor heathen child!” I felt ashamed, took it off, and never wore it again.



A more modern Soviet classroom with Pioneers. There are two girls (front row, right) not in uniform. Anni came home one day wearing a Pioneer red scarf, and her grandmother looked sad and called her a “heathen child.” She never wore it again.

School Days Under Communist Teachers ♦ ANNI

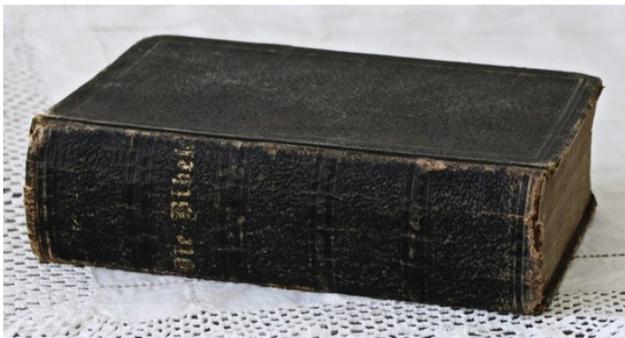
Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Communism was very opposed to Christianity. Every day in school, we sang *The Internationale*, the Communist hymn. The teacher also had us sing another Russian song that said, “The airplanes soared higher and higher and higher, and they have never seen a god.” That song was all about how futile it was to believe in God. When we were supposed to sing that song, I couldn’t actually *sing* it; I just pretended to. The teachers asked us at school, “Did you pray to God at home? Did you point to heaven and pray to God?” They sneered at our religion and said ugly things. Everybody in class was quiet. Nobody would answer or say anything.

Almost everybody in our village was a Mennonite and a Christian. But we had turncoats too, so we had to be careful about what we said. I had friends in my class (the teacher’s children) who were communists, so we didn’t talk about faith.

The communists came into our house and took our song books and the Bibles, and destroyed all our religious things. We kept one Bible hidden. When I was alone, I would haul it out and quickly read it. When I heard footsteps, I’d push it under the table to hide it.

Grandma told us children about Jesus. There was a certain plant that grew in our area that was green and had a little red on it. She’d say, “There is a legend that when they crucified Jesus, a little drop of blood fell on that leaf.” As a little girl, I’d



Anni’s grandmother taught her about God. The Dyck family kept one Bible hidden at home. When Anni was alone, she would take the Bible out of its secret place and read it.



German warplanes flew overhead as Anni graduated from school in 1941. Hitler began Operation Barbossa, his lightning-fast invasion of Ukraine on June 22, 1941.

look for those plants, and when I found one, I would sit down and think about Jesus’ death and cry. I learned my faith from Grandma. Mother didn’t have much time; she had to work all the time and care for her children all by herself, but Grandma taught me about God.

I grew up kind of alone, even though I had so many older brothers and sisters. I was the youngest, and always felt shy, so I didn’t talk much. My oldest sister, Neta, says she almost doesn’t remember me at home since I was so quiet. Neta went to live in different village after the famine, in 1933, when I was 7. My brothers and sister, Tina, were often gone too, away at school or at work.

I was sick with malaria for a couple of years. Every other day or so, I would get yellow in the face and start shaking with fever. When I was at school and an attack came on, I had to go home. Nobody was there, so I’d crawl in a big pile of straw and cover there until my fever was gone or until Mom came home. They eventually brought quinine pills into the schools, which helped me.

I was 15 when we got our diplomas. I remember my graduation day. It was 1941, the war had started, and airplanes were flying overhead.

ANNI ♦ Stalin's Purges

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



Anni's brother, Hein, served in the Russian Army until he was arrested during the Purges in 1936. He was interrogated and tortured, but refused to sign a false confession penned for him. That probably saved his life. Instead, he was exiled to the Soviet Gulag (prison camp system) in Siberia, where hundreds of thousands of others were sent during this period in Russian history.



Hein's approximate location in exile, where he spent 20 years doing hard labor. He had most likely been arrested because his German nationality made his loyalty to Russia suspect.

Stalin's Purges

Toward the middle of the 1930s, around 1936, the communists started taking men away. They began by arresting people who were in the army.

My brother, Hein, and his friend were among the first ones they took from our village. They were both serving in the Russian army when they were suddenly arrested and charged with treason. Hein told me later that he was supposed to sign a confession that he was guilty of the crimes they charged him with, but he refused to sign. His friend signed a confession and was executed. Hein told his captors that they could go ahead and kill him, but he was *not* signing anything. But the communists didn't kill Hein: they sent him to Siberia instead.

Then the police "cleaned out" the villages. They drove into town at night in paddy wagons at night and took all the men away. In just one night, they arrested 74 men from Nieder-Chortitza.

One night, my mother and I were walking home after visiting Grandma. As we passed City Hall, we saw paddy wagons parked in front and knew that the secret police had come again to pick up men. We heard voices. My mother said, "Quickly, hide!" We dove under the hedge until they disappeared, and then went home. I was ten years old, and so afraid that they would take my other brother that I couldn't sleep. I prayed all night, "Please, God, don't let them take Peter, too!"

They didn't take Peter that night, but most of the men they arrested were never heard from again. A few came back from Siberia many years later, after the Mennonites had left the Ukraine. We didn't know what had happened to Hein for 20 years. We finally heard from him around 1956. He had been in Siberia all that time, working very hard. He had been tortured, too.

After they took all the men, the village population consisted of women and children and a few men. We never could understand why they arrested whom they did. The charges against those men never made sense.

Working on the Collective Farm ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Working on the Collective Farm

The women and children who were left behind all had to work in the collective fields. Stalin's communist regime had a five-year plan. The government made up a quota, and workers had to deliver a certain amount of the crop being harvested - wheat, sunflower seeds, or whatever - to the government. When the crop was harvested, the government always took their quota first. If there was some left over, the workers received a portion determined by how many days each had worked. In a good harvest, we might get a whole wagon of watermelons as pay. A few women would squeeze out the juice and drain it, and make syrup from the watermelons. If it was a bad year, though, the government blamed the *kolkhoz* workers and said that they hadn't worked hard enough. We didn't get paid at all then.

People in our village were all friends. Everybody knew everybody else. It was like one great big family. The women all worked together, one bunch in this field and another bunch in that field. We wouldn't necessarily share our food with each other, but that was simply because everyone had so little themselves. Families would help each other out, though. Grandma shared what she had with our family. And my aunt in Neuendorf, where my oldest sister, Neta, lived, shared with us too.



This Soviet propaganda poster reads, "Work happily and the crop will be good! Spring, summer, fall, and winter."

The unwritten threat: don't work happily, and the Soviet government will deprive you of food. The government was key in the deaths of 5-7 million Ukrainians who starved to death in 1932-33.



Soviet women working in collective fields. So many of the men had been arrested that the crews were predominantly female.

ANNI ♦ Waiting for Hitler's Army

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Waiting for Hitler's Army

When the war broke out with Germany in 1941, the Mennonites were actually happy. We were waiting for Hitler's army to free us from the communists. The Germans made very quick progress into Ukraine. The Soviets were trying to get all us German-Russians across the river and sent to Siberia. They loaded people in wagons, and we were all supposed to go east. Many, many people from our village had to go.

My brother Peter was 25 or 26 then, and a tractorist for the collective farm. He had to transport his machinery across the Dnieper River. Once he had, then he was sent to Siberia. But the rest of my family in Nieder-Chortitza went into hiding. We didn't want to cross the river, so we hid at Grandma's. My mom, my sister Tina, her son Viktor, my mom's sister, Tante Nüt, and Tante Lena and her family, and I all gathered at Grandma's house and hid.

My cousin's husband was a communist, but he agreed to help us. He said, "Make sure you're quiet inside the house. I'll close the outside shutters, and put the lock on the door until they check to see if you have gone." So that's what he did. We were all crouching quietly in the dark house when we heard



Anna Dyck at age 15 in Nieder-Chortitza during the German occupation of Ukraine. For two years, times were better for the German-Mennonites. Under German rule, they had more food and were permitted freedom to worship.

Stalin ordered the NKVD to blow up the Dneiper River Dam in August, 1941, as part of his scorched-earth policy to halt Hitler's advance into Russia. No one was warned, and the resulting tsunami claimed 20,000 to 100,000 lives, many of them Russian ones. Anni and her family ran up a hill to escape the water, which filled the streets of Nieder-Chortitza but did not enter their house.



Free Us From the Communists ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

the Soviet officials come to check that we had left. We heard their footsteps all around the house. Then one of them said to the other, "I'm sure they've gone. This house is empty." We waited quite a while before we slowly ventured out, peaking first to see if they had really gone. And they had.

Maybe half the village, around 20 families, refused to go east. They hid in various ways. Some went off, left their wagons along the road, and came back to their homes. Some crossed the river, but managed to return in a couple of months. But most of the other families who went across the river ended up in Siberia.

We lived on the Dnieper River, which flows from Kiev into the Black Sea. Our village lay on a bend of the river near Chortitza Island. There was a large dam on the river a little ways upstream from us. The Russians exploded the dam one evening. A huge tidal wave came bursting into our village. It was terrifying! The cows were bellowing, and everybody was screaming, "Run, save yourselves!" as water surged everywhere. I grabbed my nephew Viktor and the cow, and we climbed a little hill. I remember cows and horses screaming as they drowned. Finally, the water quieted down. Russian soldiers came and told us, "Don't go any farther because the front is close. The Germans are

almost here." We went to spend the night with a family who lived a little ways up the hill.

When we came back to Grandma's the next day, we found that the water had stopped on her street, right at the corner of her house, but hadn't gone into the house. (There's a marker in town now to show how far up the water had flooded.)

The following morning, I looked outside and thought, "My goodness, what is all this?" There were vehicles with trees on top of them, camouflaged, and the street was filled with German soldiers. The Germans were here!

The Russians had retreated over the river, blowing up the dam and bridges so that the German army wouldn't be able to head east into Russia. Destroying the dam kept the Germans on the west side of the Dnieper River for seven weeks.

The front was in our village for those seven weeks. Across the river from us was Zaporozhia, a large Russian city. The Russians shot their big artillery from Zaporozhia into Nieder-Chortitza. It was too dangerous for us to stay in our village, so we went to a town five kilometers away to wait for the attacks to die down. Once they did, and the front moved a little farther east, we could return to our homes. The Soviets were all gone, and now we lived under German occupation.



When the German Army arrived, Anni thought their camouflage was strange. She and her family hid in her Grandmother's basement, awaiting the invading Germans. They hoped for better treatment than they had received from the Soviets.

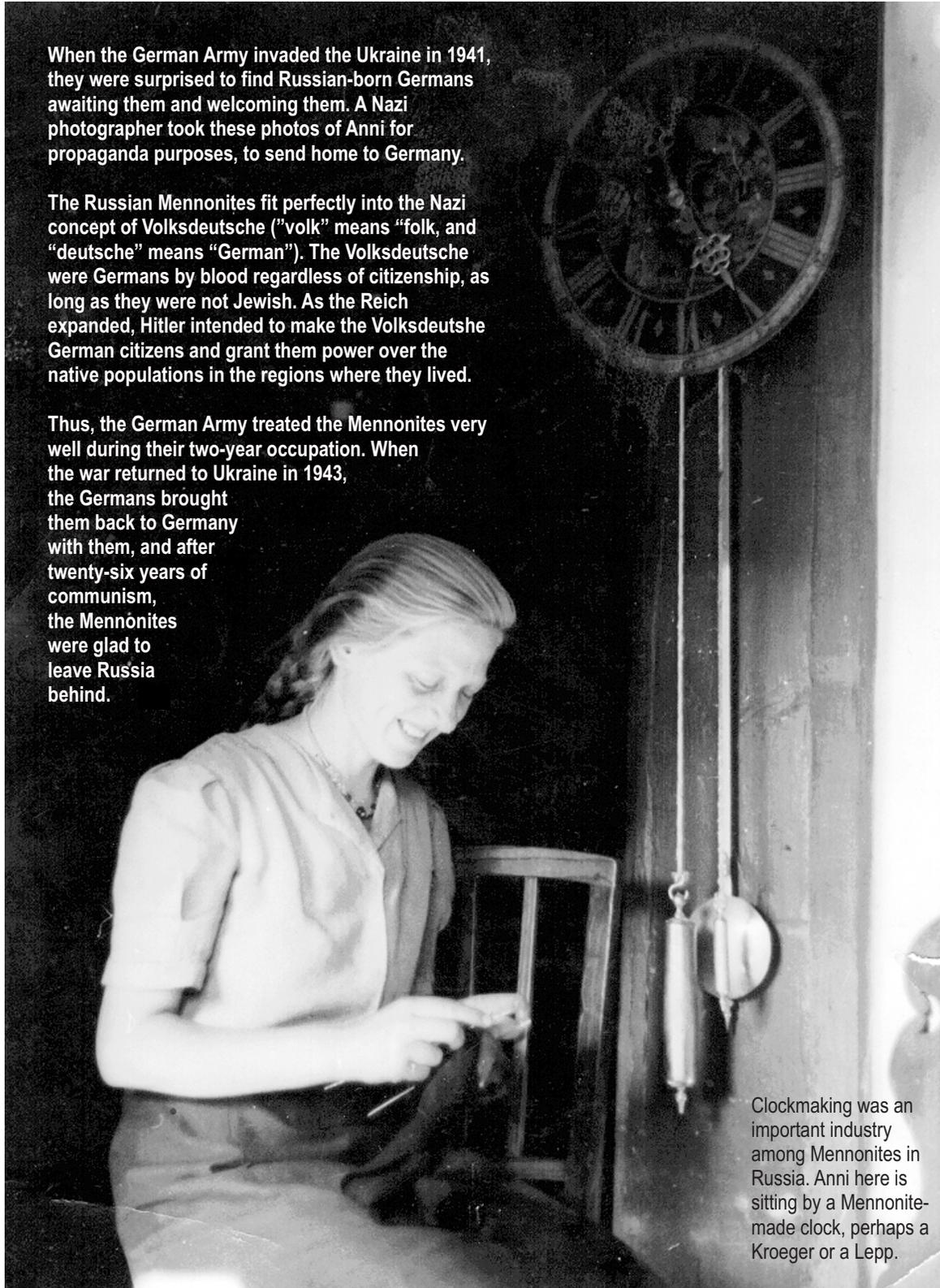
ANNI ♦ Germans in Russia: the Volksdeutsche

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

When the German Army invaded the Ukraine in 1941, they were surprised to find Russian-born Germans awaiting them and welcoming them. A Nazi photographer took these photos of Anni for propaganda purposes, to send home to Germany.

The Russian Mennonites fit perfectly into the Nazi concept of Volksdeutsche ("volk" means "folk, and "deutsche" means "German"). The Volksdeutsche were Germans by blood regardless of citizenship, as long as they were not Jewish. As the Reich expanded, Hitler intended to make the Volksdeutsche German citizens and grant them power over the native populations in the regions where they lived.

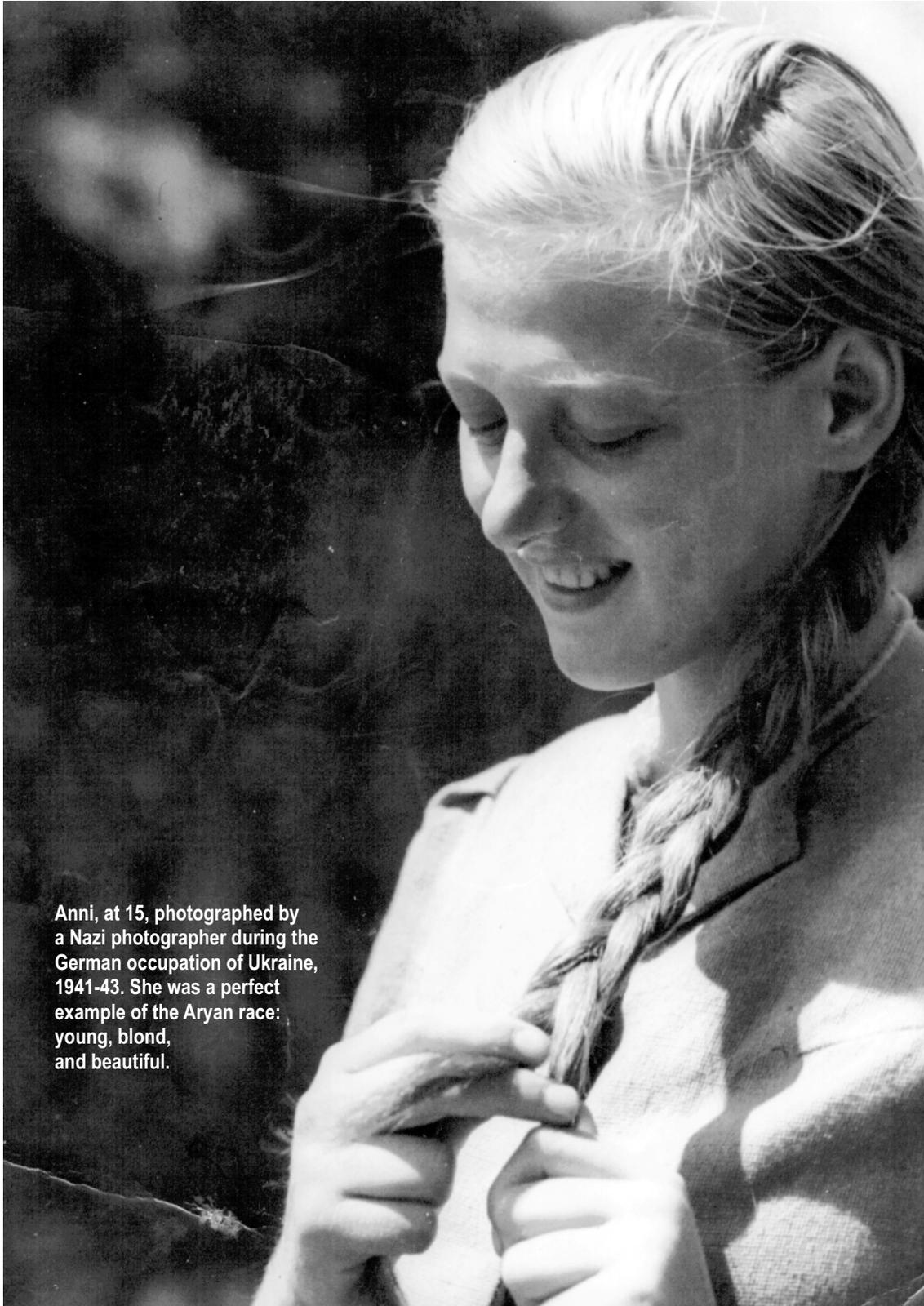
Thus, the German Army treated the Mennonites very well during their two-year occupation. When the war returned to Ukraine in 1943, the Germans brought them back to Germany with them, and after twenty-six years of communism, the Mennonites were glad to leave Russia behind.



Clockmaking was an important industry among Mennonites in Russia. Anni here is sitting by a Mennonite-made clock, perhaps a Kroeger or a Lepp.

An "Aryan" Girl ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



Anni, at 15, photographed by a Nazi photographer during the German occupation of Ukraine, 1941-43. She was a perfect example of the Aryan race: young, blond, and beautiful.

ANNI ♦ German Occupation

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



A German soldier in Kiev after its capture in 1941, looking at a burning bridge across the Dnieper River.



German soldiers returned to the Dnieper in 1943, driven back by Russian soldiers in their retreat from Ukraine.



Ukrainian women giving a German soldier a drink of water.



The Mennonites, like some Ukrainians, welcomed the Germans as liberators from Communism. Living in all-German communities in Russia, the Mennonites were well-treated by the Germans. They enjoyed peace and order under German occupation, and were oblivious to their anti-Jewish policies.

German Occupation

As soon as the Germans marched in and the front moved east, we could return home. Right away, we had more freedom. We could gather together again. We started going to church, not in a church building, just in somebody's house or the school or somewhere. Mr. Thiessen was our pastor then. The Mennonites were happy because we could resume our freedom of worship.

German occupation lasted for two years, from 1941 to 1943. The Germans treated us very well. They had a communal kitchen, and they cooked for us. We were a little better off during those years, too. We owned a couple of chickens and a cow, and I think that Grandma had a pig. The Germans sent me for kindergarten teacher training in 1941-42. I then taught kindergarten in Nieder-Chortitza.

When I first heard that the Germans were losing the war, I didn't believe it. I had thought that Hitler was our big savior, since he had fought off the communists who had treated us so badly. At that time, nobody knew what the Germans were doing to the Jews. I didn't find that out until I was already in Canada after the war. And since Stalin killed so many more people, I still think he may have been worse even than Hitler.

Leaving Ukraine With the Germans ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



The retreating German army evacuated ethnic Germans who wanted to leave Russia in 1943. This is the German evacuation of Chortitza, a village near Nieder-Chortitza. Residents in Anni's village were given just one day's notice to pack their most precious belongings and leave the rest behind in Ukraine.



Evacuees leaving Russia by train. Anni was among the more fortunate refugees in October, 1943, who took a train instead of a wagon. For seven weeks she and her family traveled in open coal RR cars without roofs, sitting on their baggage. The train stopped more than it moved, but it finally made it to Poland.

Leaving Ukraine With the Germans

In 1943, we heard the canons come back, and the familiar rumble of war returning. The German army returned. They said that they would take us Germans with them. We were given just one day's notice to pack. We took everything we could with us: bedding, pots and pans, and dried buns to eat along the way. I was only 17 when we left Ukraine.

The Germans put everybody from our village on a train; we were on that train for seven weeks. We travelled in big coal wagons with open roofs, and sat on our bags. It was fall, and cold already. It was too crowded to lie down. The train didn't move much. The tracks were clogged with other trains, all trying to get west. We would go a few kilometers at a time, and then we would be stuck again. Whenever we were stuck, we would run and try to find something to eat at the closest Russian village. Some towns were completely empty; all the people had gone. But where there were still Russian people, they were very good to us.

After seven weeks, we arrived in Poland. There, we had to go through delousing. Oh, that felt good! They took all our clothes off, and put a

lice treatment on our heads. We sat and waited for that treatment to work, completely naked, and then we could go soap up and shower. I was so ashamed of being naked that I covered myself as best as I could. Then a man stamped "deloused" on us before we were given our clothes back. All our clothes had been disinfected, so we put on clean clothes after the shower. Then we were sent to a hotel where we slept on clean, white bed sheets. Another girl and I had a room to ourselves. We had a nice breakfast and a good dinner, and we thought we were in heaven.

From there, we boarded the train again, and it didn't take long to make it to Germany. We arrived

A refugee undergoing delousing. Anni had been in transit for weeks without a shower when she arrived in Poland. The refugees had to strip naked for delousing. It was humiliating, "but it felt good to be clean!" she said.



ANNI ♦ A Refugee in Europe

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



Anni Dyck, Ertje, and Anni Friesen in Backnang, Germany in 1944, where Anni stayed for a couple of weeks. In places she stayed longer, she taught kindergarten.

at a refugee camp in a town called Lampertswalde. I taught school in that camp for half a year, even though I didn't know much about teaching.

And then we were sent from to Dresden, where we lived in a refugee camp in a factory. I was the kindergarten teacher there as well. The women all had to work, and I looked after their kids.

After that, the Germans sent us from Dresden to Windisch Landsberg, Yugoslavia (today Podčetrtek, Slovenia), where we lived in a big castle on top of a mountain. The Germans had confiscated the castle and turned it into a refugee camp. Refugee families worked for farmers in the village, and I taught kindergarten again. We attended a Catholic church because it was the only church in town. In the summer, all the refugees assembled in the castle veranda, and we would sing together. We sang every song we knew: German songs, Christian songs, and folksongs.

At this time, my sister Tina worked in an office in a different city, Sallenberg. My mom was with Viktor, and my sister Neta and my aunt, Tante Nüt, were in different villages.

Then the war started going badly for the Germans again. The kindergarten was dismissed, and the Partisans (local resistance fighters) made the refugees dig trenches for the soldiers. We were frightened of the Partisans, but they didn't harm us.

Anni's wartime trek through Europe.

She went by train to Poland, then to Germany, where she stayed for half a year. Then she was sent to Yugoslavia until the end of the war.



Living in a Castle ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Anni lived in this castle-turned-refugee camp in Windisch Landsberg, Yugoslavia (Podčetrtek, Slovenia). She walked down to the village each weekday to teach kindergarten, and in the summer, she and others would gather in the castle veranda and sing German folksongs, which rang out over the hills.



Anni and other Mennonite women with German soldiers in Windisch Landsberg, 1944.
The German soldiers were friendly, and she was with other German-Mennonites that she knew from home.

ANNI ♦ Stuck in Communist Yugoslavia and a Death March

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Stuck in Communist Yugoslavia and a Death March

When the war ended, Yugoslavia was zoned communist. We knew that we had to get from Yugoslavia to a different zone. We didn't want the communists to capture us. So my mom, my sister Tina, her son Viktor, and I packed up and went with the soldiers. The roads were crowded with people heading for the border on foot, trying to leave the country. There were so many people on the roads that we couldn't move quickly.

When we reached the border, the Partisans (Yugoslavian communist soldiers) wouldn't let us cross. They started driving all the people away from the border. "Young people have to walk back!" they yelled. "Old people can ride in a truck." My mom was put in the truck with Viktor, and Tina and I started walking. Viktor, who was only about six, started to cry. My mom said, "Tina, look after your son!" So Tina jumped onto the truck, and I said to them, "Goodbye, see you tonight." It was mostly to reassure myself, because I thought, "If we get separated, how will we ever find each other again?" And it was true. That was the last time I saw them for many months.

When you see pictures of thousands of refugees walking together, that's what it was like. Guards flanked us on either side so we couldn't go

anywhere. That night, we camped at a big field, almost like a football field. We slept out in the open. I had a blanket and a pillow with me.

In the morning, we had to go on again. I didn't want to go further until I found my family. I told the guards, "I'm not leaving here. I need to wait for my mother and my sister." The guards said, "They're not coming." "Then I'll wait here," I told them. "I'm not leaving." "Oh, yes, you are!" they said, and I had to go with them.

The guards pushed us on relentlessly. I met two girls, and walked with them. We grew so tired. One of the girls couldn't keep up. A guard knocked her down with the butt of his rifle and beat her up. The German soldiers who were walking with us said, "They're not going to do that to the girls anymore." They had us walk in the middle and they flanked us, protecting us.

One of the German soldiers was a medic who carried a little bit of sugar. Whenever we found some water, he would mix it with sugar and give it to us to drink, to keep our energy up. My shoes wore out, and one of the other soldiers gave me a pair of shoes. By this time, I was so tired of lugging my pillow that I threw it away. But I held onto my blanket. The girls and I talked among ourselves. I said, "Once we cross into Czechoslovakia, we won't be able to get out. What shall we do?" But we couldn't escape.



Surrendering soldiers at the Bleiburg Border in May, 1945.

A DEATH MARCH & MASSACRE

The Bleiburg Repatriations, 1945

At the end of World War II, several hundred thousand people fled communist-zoned Yugoslavia toward the Austrian border. Many were German or NDH (Croatian) soldiers, some of whom who had been responsible for the deaths of 300,000 people in Yugoslavia during WWII, mostly minorities. Some were innocent refugees like Anni and her family, who got swept into the fray. They were all hoping to surrender to British troops at or near the Austrian town of Bleiburg, rather than to the communist Yugoslav Partisans or Soviet troops.

The fleeing soldiers and civilians were turned back at the Austrian border, and forced to be repatriated. In an event which came to be called "The Bleiburg Repatriations" or "The Bleiburg Massacre," soldiers and civilians were marched east. Anni was separated from her family during the march. Communist Partisan forces strafed the columns of marchers with machine guns. Anni was shot by a Partisan spraying the crowd with machine gun fire. Although seriously wounded, her misfortune may have actually saved her life because it removed her from the death march.

Tens of thousands of others were murdered and their bodies dumped in mass graves as they were driven through the fields and forests of Yugoslavia (Slovenia and Croatia). Thousands of others were incarcerated in forced labor camps.

The exact number of those who died during this event that started in Bleiburg varies widely. The communist government buried the event for years. Current estimates are between 23,000 and 100,000, with 45,000-55,000 being the most likely, based on archeological evidence, demographic calculations, and eyewitness accounts.



The Barbara Pit Mass Grave in Slovenia holds the remains of around 3000 people killed during the ensuing "death marches."



Anni and her family were among the thousands of soldiers and refugees caught in Soviet-zoned Yugoslavia at the end of World War II, desperate to escape capture by the Soviets.



The crowd at the Yugoslav-Austrian border near Bleiburg were denied refuge in Austria, and turned over to the Yugoslav government to be repatriated as Soviet citizens, according to the Yalta Agreement. They were marched back, brutalized by Partisans all the way. Anni and her family became separated at this time. Old people and children were taken by truck, but Anni was strong and young, and required to walk. This event in May, 1945, came to be known as the **Bleiburg Repatriations**.



Bleiburg-Repatriation refugees spent the night in an open field. Anni didn't want to go further until she found her family, but guards drove the crowd on toward Czechoslovakia.

ANNI ♦ Shot and Left for Dead

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



A Partisan Resistance fighter sprayed the crowd with his machine gun. Anni was hit in both legs.

Shot and Left for Dead

Suddenly, a Yugoslavian soldier on a horse yelled, “Convoy to the right!” He passed us and stopped in front of us. Then he pulled down his machine gun and started shooting at the whole crowd of people.

I was hit on both legs. On one leg, I had six holes, and on my other leg, my ankle was badly smashed. I plunked down and couldn’t get up. The German medic tried to help me. He bandaged my legs and gave me some pills. Then a Red Cross wagon came, and the medics put me on a stretcher and lifted me into the wagon, putting my bag under my head. I had the sensation that my bag was falling, so I lay there reaching behind me, pulling and pulling on what I thought was my bag. Finally, a soldier said to me, “Dear child, would you please let go of my head?” It turns out, he was sitting beneath me, and what I thought was my bag was actually his head. I had been pulling and tugging on it all that time. Poor man!

We travelled for a while on the truck, and then the Partisans took the truck away. They made everybody get off, and left us on a little meadow alongside of a river. One of the Partisans asked me

what had happened. When I told him, he responded, “It serves you right! You were trying to escape!” After that, I realized that I couldn’t tell *that* story anymore, so from that point on, I just said that my injuries were the result of an accident. Our guards returned and told everybody to go on.

The Partisans said that whoever couldn’t walk would be shot. That wasn’t an idle threat. They actually shot people, and threw away their dead bodies. I have seen it myself.

Everybody else left, and I laid there all day. One medic stayed with me as long as he could. He said it was his duty to stay with the sick. He gave me pills to help with the pain from time to time. But later in the day he woke me up and said, “I want you to know that I am not leaving you out of my free will. But the Partisans have already shot at me twice, and I have to go.” So I said, “Okay, go, then.”

I couldn’t walk. I couldn’t even move my toes. I was just lying in a field all alone. I cried, and then I prayed, and then I felt as if Jesus was sitting beside me. And I didn’t worry anymore. I knew whatever happened would be okay. If I died, it would be okay, and if I didn’t, then that would be okay, too.

Anni was assisted by a German army medic, transported in a Red Cross Wagon, and then finally abandoned in a field.



Rescue & Interrogation ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Rescue & Interrogation

In the late afternoon, a farmer came by the field where I had been abandoned. He asked what had happened to me. I told him my story, and I guess he didn't want to leave me lying there. He had a buggy and a horse, and he and his son, who had only one leg, dragged me onto their buggy. They took me about eight kilometers to the next village. There was a makeshift hospital there, something like an old-folks home that had been converted into a hospital, run by nuns. But that hospital refused me. "You're German?" they asked me. "Then we can't accept you."

Then I was taken into custody, and brought to headquarters. The Partisans took me off the stretcher and put me on a table. Funny, I don't remember being in pain from my bullet wounds, just from laying on that table. I thought my back would break, it was so hard. I must have been in shock. And then they interrogated me.

It turns out I could speak enough Slavic to be understood. Since I speak Russian and Ukrainian, I could understand Yugoslavian and Polish because the languages are very similar. The interrogator asked, "Why do you speak our language so well?"

"I was born in Ukraine," I told him. "Oh, oh!" he said. "You're running away from the Russians! You little traitor..." and he cursed me. "I don't really know what side I'm on," I said. "I'm pretty young."

"You thought Germany would win," he accused me. "Actually, I did!" I responded. Then I told him, "But I have a brother fighting in the Russian army." It was kind of true. My brother,

Anni's captors took her to interrogation instead of to the hospital. They questioned her, and then sent her to a field hospital, where she was treated until the German doctors were all taken away.

Hein, had been in the Russian army, but I didn't tell my examiner that the Russians had sent him to Siberia.

That sparked his interest, though. "Oh?" he asked. "Yes," I said, "I have a brother fighting for the Russians." "You should have stayed in Russia then!" the interrogator told me. "Well, the Germans took everybody with them when they retreated," I said.

"I'll bet you think just the Germans are good," he accused me. "No," I responded, "I think there are good and bad people in every

nation. We had very good neighbors in Russia and very good neighbors in Yugoslavia, but there were also bad ones. I'll bet there are bad ones in Germany too." "You are right," he said. And that ended the questioning.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" he asked me. "No," I said. "Send me to a Prisoners of War camp where I can speak German." "You belong in the hospital," he said, so he sent me there instead.

There were still German doctors at that hospital when I first arrived. They put a cast on my leg, and treated my wounds for a couple of days. But then the Partisans took the German doctors away, leaving no trained medical staff, just nuns. I got a



A farmer and his son found Anni lying in the field. They put her on their buggy and took her to a hospital.



ANNI ♦ Giving Up, a Bicycle Rescue, and a Helpful Doctor

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

bit better, though, while I was there. After a month, I could walk on crutches.

It was a lonely time. Nobody came to see me in the hospital, absolutely nobody. I had lost track of all my family. I was entirely alone. All during that time, I prayed. When I said the Lord's Prayer and came to the part, "Thy will be done," I became calm. I figured my future was in God's hands. Whatever God wanted for me would happen, and I didn't have to worry.

Giving Up, a Bicycle Rescue, and a Helpful Doctor

After a month, the Yugoslavians sent all the Germans to a camp for displaced persons (Dps). That meant me, too. Germans from all over Europe were put on trains again, and transported to this camp. The trip took several days.

My crutches were taken away, and I couldn't get around. Some girls made a chair for me with their arms, and they carried me. When the train stopped, they would carry me behind the train so that I could use the bathroom, and then carry me back.

When we arrived at the DP camp, it was June. I lay outside on my blanket on the grass during the day, and at night, the girls dragged me inside to sleep. An old man brought me a little bit of food each day. But I had given up.

One day, this old man brought me lunch, and I told him, "I'm not eating anymore." He was so angry that he threw the food on the lawn, and took off.

Anni made a slow recovery, but a doctor saved her leg from being amputated, and made her walk on it until it was useful again. She then helped tend to other patients.



About an hour later, the old man came back with a doctor. The doctor looked at me and he said, "My God! We've got to get you to the hospital right away!" The doctor put me on the front of his bicycle, and pedaled me to the hospital himself. He promised to look after my belongings, which included my blanket, a pair of men's pants, and those shoes that the bullets had gone through. Those were all my worldly goods.

After examining my injuries, the doctor told me, "I don't know if we can save your leg. We might have to amputate it." He thought it might have gangrene. He gave me a bath. It felt so good to have a bath after weeks, or longer. And then in the morning, he took me to the operating room. As he put ether on, I pleaded, "Please don't cut off my leg!" When I awoke after surgery, I didn't know if they had amputated it or not. That leg seemed *so* heavy, but it was still there.

I was in the hospital another month after surgery. Then I asked to return to the camp where this doctor worked who had been so

kind to me. I was permitted to move back to where he was, and placed on his sick ward. This doctor who had helped me before helped me again. He made me do therapy and walk on my leg. He said, "You'll always walk with a limp if you don't do this!" First, he allowed me to use crutches, but then only a stick. Then he made me throw the stick away, too. And he even forced me to walk on my toes. At first, it was so painful that the tears ran down my cheeks. But I still thank him that he made me do it, because I have full use of my legs today.

Smuggled Across the Border ♦ ANNI

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)

Smuggled Across the Border

I helped this doctor look after the sick. I'd take their temperature and help them eat. When workers brought up food for the ward, there was always a portion for me too. Sometimes I wouldn't eat my share, but would send it instead down to the poor people. I thought, "I can do without this. If I can do without, maybe somebody else will give some food to my mother, my brothers, or my sisters."

One day, a Russian Commissar came and said to me, "You're from Russia."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you can return to Russia now," he told me. "Isn't it nice that you can go back?"

"I don't want to go back," I told him.

"Why not?" he asked me.

"My mother and my sister are in Austria," I said. I actually had no idea where they were, but I certainly didn't want to go back to Russia! He talked and talked to me, trying to convince me to return to Russia. I kept saying, "No, no, no! I don't want to go back there!"

Finally, he said, "I'm not asking you if you want to. You have to!"

I sat crying after he left, and went and told the doctor. The doctor said to me, "You are too good for the Russians to have you! The camp where he's talking about sending you is filled with pregnant girls who were raped by Russian soldiers. You're not going there."

The next morning, I was supposed to be on the train by nine o'clock. A woman from the administrative office ran up to me. "What are you still doing here? You are supposed to be at the station!"

The doctor said to me, "Quick! Get into bed!" Then he rubbed the thermometer until it showed a

Displaced people in Europe were all supposed to return to their country of origin at the end of the war, but for those who had fled communism or been friendly to the Germans, it would have meant exile to Siberia or even death. The Soviet government viewed them as traitors. Over a million Soviet citizens were returned to the Soviet Union against their will.



The same thermometer trick schoolchildren have used for years saved Anni from being sent back to Russia.

Her doctor rubbed it until it indicated a high temperature and told the authorities that Anni was too ill to be moved. Then he arranged to have her put on a transport to Austria.

high fever. He said to her, "Look at this thermometer. This patient is too sick to be moved."

After she had left he said, "I'll smuggle you out of here. I have friends that go across the border. I know when they're coming again, and I'll get you out of here." He was Yugoslavian, and was married to an Austrian lady who was in Gratz.

Guards were everywhere, so I couldn't just leave. Then we found out that there was a transport going to Austria. The doctor went to the office and he said, "This woman is my helper. She needs to go to see her mother in Austria." He got me authorization and put me on a transport, and so I left Yugoslavia and made it to the English zone in Austria.

I can't even remember the doctor's name now who helped me so much, or the farmer's name who brought me to the hospital in his buggy. I wish I could go back and thank them now. I always remember them in my prayers.

