

# ISAAC'S WAR

## 1941-1943

The Germans launched Operation Barbarossa, a surprise invasion of the Soviet Union, on Sunday, June 22, 1941. They were looking to expand their territory and to destroy communism. Hitler sent four million soldiers to the 2000-mile front, and the invading German Army made quick headway into the Soviet Union.

Within a week of the invasion, Isaac Loewen crossed the Dnieper River to the east with his tractor brigade but slipped back to Neuendorf and went into hiding. In August, he and his family fled west toward the invading army, rather than be evacuated east to Siberia.

The Germans arrived in Neuendorf on August 18, 1941, and the Loewens returned a few days later. The Army showed an affinity toward the Mennonites as fellow Germans and tried to recruit the men for military service, but the Mennonites declined because of their pacifist convictions. As it was early in the campaign, the Germans used persuasion to court favor with the *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans outside of Germany). This gentle treatment would ebb as the war continued.

Isaac was home for a month after the German occupation. There was no work as a tractor machinist, so Isaac and four other men from his tractor brigade eventually agreed to work for the Germans as chauffeurs and interpreters. This way, they could support their families and help the Germans defeat their common enemies of Stalin and communism without participating directly in the war. Isaac was able to come home frequently while working in this capacity.

Early in 1942, Isaac and the Neuendorf men were officially drafted as soldiers. They sent their wives to the commander in Chortitza asking for their release, but the commander denied their request. During the war, 650,000 ethnic Germans from occupied territories were drafted into the Wehrmacht (Army), the Waffen-SS, and the Police service. Isaac's uniform suggests that he was drafted into the Wehrmacht. His name was changed to Fritz in the German Army, as Isaac was too Jewish a name.



The Germans made quick headway into the Soviet Union with their "Lightning Warfare." Army Group South headed straight through the Chortitza Mennonite colony.

In the fall of 1941, the German Army advanced far into the Soviet Union. It took western Ukraine, placed Leningrad under siege, and attacked Moscow. The worst winter in 140 years stalled the Army's advance, however, locking Germany into a two-front war it would eventually lose.

Isaac likely arrived at the front between late January and early February, 1942. In his first letter home, dated February, 1942, he wrote:

*Dear Neta, My thoughts are constantly with you and the children. As passionately as we in Russia long for spring, I wait for a letter from you. Plant as much as you can [in the garden], for I can't promise you much financial help. My wage is so low, and the little I save, I can't even send you.*

*Don't worry about me. In my 28 years, I have survived many hardships, and I'll survive this one too. Take care of yourself and the children. Never lose heart.*

*With much love, Isaac*

And then he added: "Peter Thiessen tells me you are to become *Reichsdeutsche* (Citizens of the Third Reich). Neta, don't rush into this. Better leave it for now. I have my reasons for saying this, but I would rather not put them on paper."

It appears that within his first few weeks of war, Isaac may have already encountered the Holocaust.

# THE HOLOCAUST

## on the Eastern Front

The invading German forces wiped out Jews along the Eastern Front with startling efficiency. Four special units called *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) A, B, C, and D accompanied the Army to carry out the "Final Solution" (see map on previous page). *Einsatzgruppe D*'s 600 men attached to the Eleventh Army passed right through the Chortitza Colony, Zaporozhia to the East, and south to the Caucasus. German troops, police units, and locals were sometimes ordered to assist them.

In each conquered municipality, the *Einsatzgruppen* used a systematic approach to bring about the "Final Solution." Within a few days of German occupation, they hung fliers requiring the Jews of that city to register at a local Jewish council office, pay a fine, and wear a yellow Star of David. A few days later, Jews were notified to report for relocation, bringing their possessions and valuables. Having no idea what lay in store for them, the Jews complied.



A truck driver named Hofer testified about the events in Kiev in September 1941: "I watched what happened when the Jews—men, women and children—arrived. The Ukrainians led them past a number of different places where one after the other they had to give up their luggage, then their coats, shoes and over-garments and also underwear. They also had to leave their valuables in a designated place. There was a special pile for each article of clothing. It all happened very quickly and anyone who hesitated was kicked or pushed by the Ukrainians to keep them moving.

"Once undressed, they were led into the ravine, where they were seized by members of the *Schutzpolizei* and made to lie down on top of Jews who had already been shot. The corpses were literally in layers. A police marksman came along and shot each Jew in the neck with a submachine gun. I saw these marksmen stand on layers of corpses and shoot one after the other..." A total of 33,771 Jews were murdered in two days in the Babi Yar ravine; only 29 survived. Later, another 150,000 Jews, Soviet POWs, Romanians, and Ukrainian nationalists were killed there.

This obscene "cleansing" of enemies of the Nazi regime played out over and over. Mass shootings, concentration camps, ghettos, forced labor, starvation, and torture were part of the Eastern Holocaust.



**Jews digging their own graves in Storow, Ukraine, on July 4, 1941.** The Germans killed thousands of communists, Gypsies, and the mentally ill or handicapped as well.

German forces occupied Zaporozhia on October 3, 1941. In November, several dozen Jewish men and boys were shot at the local stadium, and in March, 1942, another 3,700 Jews were shot near a collective farm. Even some Mennonites participated. In the two-year occupation, 44,000 Jews were killed in the Zaporozhia area.

As the Germans conquered new territory, the killings continued. The murder sites varied (factory warehouses in Odessa; a glass factory in Mineralnye Vody; trenches elsewhere), but the method remained the same: Jews were registered, fined, and "relocated." The numbers defy reason: 10,000 Jews killed in Mariupol; 10,000 in Dnepropetrovsk; 34,000 in Odessa. In April, 1942, in Donetsk, 15,000 Jews were thrown alive down abandoned mine shafts. Eventually the Army concluded that shooting live victims was difficult emotionally for the *Einsatzgruppen*; to make the process easier on the perpetrators (not the victims), gassing vans were supplied to help them murder Jews.

Meanwhile, the Army carefully removed the Stars of David from the clothing of the murdered Jews, then distributed the clothing among the *Volksdeutsche* and others to gain their support. Most Mennonites had no idea of where the clothing came from, and knew little of the Holocaust until after the war.

During the two years of German occupation, hundreds of thousands more were killed in occupied territories. By the spring of 1943, the *Einsatzgruppen* had killed 1.25 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of Soviets and POWs.



**A member of Einsatzgruppe D shoots a man by a mass grave in Vinnytsia, Ukraine in 1942, while German Army soldiers look on.**



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## 1914-1942

As a soldier, Isaac may have witnessed some of the horrific events of the Holocaust, or even been compelled to participate. The Mennonite colonies were almost entirely homogeneous, with only German-Mennonites living there, so the ethnic cleansing occurring in other cities did not occur in them; and the Germans did not advertise to the *Volksdeutsche* this dark side of their campaign while they were recruiting them as allies. But various Army groups were required to assist the *Einsatzgruppen* in their grim duties, and it is possible that Isaac did too.

When he came home in April 1942 for a two-week leave, Isaac went immediately to request discharge from the local commander in Chortitza on moral grounds. The officer denied his request. He was stuck.



Isaac returned to Neuendorf for a two-week leave in April, 1942. Here he is showing off his gun.

August 12, and ethnic cleansing occurred in every city captured along the way. The Soviets withdrew south to the Caucasus Mountains, giving them strategic high ground in the mountains.

And then, Hitler made the fatal decision to conquer Stalingrad as well as the Caucasus. Stalingrad was not an important city strategically, but it would have served as an assembly place for oil distribution. Moreover, controlling the city bearing Stalin's name would have been a huge symbolic victory. In August, German forces launched an attack on the city. Hitler diverted Army Group B and the 4th Panzer Army from the Caucasus campaign to help at Stalingrad, significantly weakening Germany's military strength in the Caucasus.

Army Group A continued waging war in the Caucasus region. Although they made rapid progress initially, once the

weather turned cold, the Germans found the Caucasus Mountains impassable. More men were lost to frostbite than to battle. German forces grew thinner as the *Luftwaffe* (Air Force) was dispatched to Stalingrad, while the Soviet forces gained strength. By October, the Soviets had 300 tanks in the Caucasus, many of them lend-lease equipment from their British and American allies.

Isaac returned home for three days on November 5, 1942. He had been almost to Stalingrad, probably serving in a unit under Army Group South B. This was his last visit home.

### 1942 on the Eastern Front

In July, the Germans launched "Operation Blue," an attempt to capture the Caucasus's oil fields. The German invading force was always short on fuel, and Hitler believed that whoever controlled the oil would win the war. As the Germans advanced into the Caucasus region, Isaac was among them. On July 25, 1942, German troops captured Rostov, paving the way for a Caucasus invasion.

At first, the invasion went well for the German Army. The Germans captured Stavropol on August 3, and Krasnodar on

Isaac would have participated in operations and battles in the Caucasus and near Stalingrad in 1942 and 1943. He returned home briefly in April and November 1942. It is likely that he was, at least for a time, part of Army Group South B, re-routed from the Caucasus to aid in the Battle of Stalingrad. We do not know his division or company, which would make it easier to track his wartime involvement. He ended up in Kiev in November, 1943.



# ISAAC'S WAR

1914-1942



**Germans soldiers fighting in Stalingrad.** Isaac had been nearly to Stalingrad when he returned home in November, 1942.



**The "Dancing Children" statue in the center of burning Stalingrad.** Stalingrad was turning point of the Eastern Front.

## *A Hasty Retreat in 1943*

In January, 1943, the Soviet Red Army began driving the Germans out of the Caucasus. It was a rapid retreat. By February, the Germans had withdrawn west of the Don River.

In February, German forces surrendered at Stalingrad and any units remaining fled west. It had been the largest and bloodiest battle in history with over two million casualties. Of the 90,000 Germans captured at Stalingrad, only 6,000 returned to Germany alive after the war. It was an overwhelming defeat for the Germans, and a turning point in the war.

Isaac wrote on March 9, 1943 from the Eastern Front, probably west of the Don River where the German forces were regrouping:

*Dear Neta, I have time today to answer your letters. First, I wish you and the children good health and happiness, that our loving heavenly Father might grant it to you. Thank God I am healthy too, but I can't say that I feel blessed.*



*I'm so happy that you were able to give the children a few happy moments at Christmas. My thoughts are constantly with you and the children. I keep wondering how you've managed all winter. Was Lena able to attend school? Did you have enough warm clothing? And, Little Agnes, is she in good health now? Little Fred will be walking by now. And the baby? I haven't heard any news. How I would love to visit you! It would be such a joy to see you all up close.*

*Winter is almost over now. It wasn't as cold as last winter. I spent all of January and half of February outside, mostly on horseback, not just during the day but also at night. Believe me, I could tell from which direction the wind was blowing! But now we've been in one place for three weeks already.\* I hope to hear from you soon. With much love, your Isaac*

Because Isaac was on horseback for six weeks, he was likely part of a horseback division in January and February, 1942. The Wehrmacht had discontinued their cavalry in mid-1941 and reformed it later in 1943, so that is not a possibility. However, it still used over a million horses for intelligence, policing, pulling equipment, and support, so he could have been part of one of these units. Another possibility is that he was with the Waffen SS at this time, which used horse units continuously through the war for policing and intelligence. One SS brigade was converted in mid-1942 into the SS Cavalry Division. It tried unsuccessfully to relieve the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, engaged in several flank-covering retreats, and fought in the losing battles for Kharkov and Dnepropetrovsk. It is feasible that Isaac participated in some of these larger campaigns, or he may have been on some less notable ones.

**A German soldier at the Don River.** German forces driven out of the Caucasus and Stalingrad regrouped at Rostov and nearby.



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## 1914-1942

The Red line shows the Battle of the Dnieper, of which the Battle of Kiev was a part. As the Germans were driven west of the Dnieper River, they burned and destroyed everything they could, including the bridges and the dam at Zaporozhia.

*Ostfront, April 1943*

Dear Neta, At long last I received some news from you. So we have a healthy baby girl, and all went well at her birth. Thank God for that! I am well too, and now that I have a letter from you, I feel considerably cheered up.

Neta, it is sad for us Russian-born German soldiers. We have lived 165 years in Russia and despite great hardships, we have kept our German language and culture, and now the German officers treat us like Russian peasants.

As the war deteriorated for the German Army, the Volksdeutsche were less of an asset, and became second class citizens.

### *The Soviets Retake Ukraine*

Early in 1943, the Red Army lost the 14-month Battle of Rzhev, with over a million casualties, and in March, 1943, the Red Army lost the Third Battle of Kharkov. But in July, the Soviets began to be victorious. They defeated the German Army at the Battle of Kursk, the largest tank battle in history. In August, the Soviets retook Kharkov and Belgorod, and in October liberated Smolensk. Each victory was won with staggering human losses, but the Red Army drove the Germans back.

While it is not certain which battles Isaac saw in 1943, it is evident from his letters that he was retreating rapidly. As the front neared the Dnieper, he worried for his family. The Germans had promised to evacuate the Volksdeutsche ahead of the German Army. They dropped leaflets on the Mennonite villages, telling them to prepare for an evacuation.

*Ostfront, September 1943*

Dear Neta, We are out of immediate danger, but we've been running constantly. Neta, I worry about you. Should you have to evacuate, how will you manage with four small children? Let's hope it won't come to that, but be prepared. Please write me as soon as you can, and let me know exactly how and where you are. Send a letter along with a soldier to the eastern front. I'll get it all right. Let's trust that our heavenly Father will send us only what's good for us, for without Him we can do nothing. Greet Mother and all my siblings from me. I greet you with a kiss. Good night! Isaac



Between September and December, 1943, the enormous Battle of the Dnieper was fought, one of the largest operations in World War II, with 4 million troops stretched over 1400 kilometers. During this 4-month operation, the Germans suffered 1.6 million casualties (the Soviets lost less than 300,000). They were driven to the western side of the Dnieper River, and the Red Army secured several footholds on the eastern bank. As the Germans retreated from Ukraine, they blew up or burned anything in their path, including bridges and railway lines. The destruction was enormous.

The Red Army liberated Mariupol on September 10. From September 26 to October 14, a battle waged at Zaporozhia. That must have been terrifying news for both Isaac, because Neta and the children were still in Neuendorf, just a few kilometers west. On October 13 and 14, the German army lost the city and the bridgeheads, and retreated across the Dnieper to Chortitza. They blew up the Dnieper Dam on October 14 after crossing the river, causing widespread destruction like the Soviets had in 1941. Four days later, Neta and the remaining Mennonites, who were mostly women, children, and old men, were evacuated. Dnepropetrovsk, north of Zaporozhia, was liberated on October 25, 1943, and Kiev was next. Neta must have gotten a letter through to Isaac, because in early November, Isaac wrote from the Kiev area:

# ISAAC'S WAR

## 1914-1942

*Ostfront, November 1943*

*Dear Neta, With great joy I found out where you are and I do hope this letter reaches you. I haven't had any news of you for a long time. How did you manage to escape? What were you able to take along? Do you have enough food and clothes for the children? Are they well? Where are my mother and sister? Do you have enough money to live on? Please write me as soon as possible. My address is Field Post Number 47792/C. Give my letter to a soldier, and I'll get it. You have no idea how I'm longing to hear from you. They've promised me a furlough as soon as I receive a letter from you. I know you're as anxious to see me as I am to see you. I have some gifts for you and the children. I've wanted to send you a parcel, but I didn't know how to reach you.*

*Neta, I know it is not easy for you with small children in a foreign land. Don't lose hope. We'll soon be together again, and then I'll help you care for our children.*

*I'll see you soon. With love and a kiss, Isaac*

One might think that the field post number provided by Isaac, 47792/C would be a valuable clue in determining his division. However, the same field post number was used for different companies during the war. As one unit was destroyed, new units would be formed and the number allocated to a different regiment. The number was associated earlier in 1943 with the 1st Equestrian Squadron of the Security Division, 444, and from March 12, 1943 to September 7, 1943, it belonged to the East Rider Division of 454, both horseback companies that had been involved in the Holocaust. Notes on the 444 Hedge Division say that from October 25, 1943 to November 20, 1944, the division command shared its number with the division map location 644. Thus, the only firm conclusion from Isaac's field post number is that it was in the vicinity of Kiev.

### *The Battle for Kiev - 1943*

Kiev, Ukraine's capital and third most populous city, was central in the Battle of the Dnieper. Kiev was difficult to take because it stood on

**Isaac fought in the Battle of Kiev, November 3-6, 1943** when the Red Army took Kiev back from the Germans.

the high right bank of the River. In order to dislodge the German Army from Kiev, the Soviets needed to get their tanks across the river. Soviet forces had assembled and tried at the Bukrin Bridgehead, 150 km south of Kiev, but found the German defensive position too strong there.

On October 25, Stalin ordered Red Army General Rybalko to quietly transfer his entire 3rd Guards Tank Army from the Bukrin Bridgehead to Lyutezh, just north of Kiev. It was an operation of stealth. It took three nights to move the army out of the Bukrin bridgehead, another two days to move north and cross the small Desna River, and then to cross branches of the Dnieper again on pontoon bridges. To obscure their movement, the Russians left behind non-operational tanks and sent out false radio reports. Rain and fog grounded the *Luftwaffe*, so German reconnaissance did not detect the transfer. By November 2, the entire 3rd Guards Tank Army was poised for attack in the Lyutezh Bridgehead, along with the Russian 7th Artillery Corps.

The Germans had four infantry divisions from XIII Armeekorps holding the Lyutezh Bridgehead and the 8th Panzer Division nearby, but they were battered. At 8:00 a.m. on Wednesday, November 3, the Red 38th Army began their attack. They subjected the Germans units to 40 minutes of heavy artillery fire. The Germans were entrenched, but too weak to halt the ground assault that followed.

The Germans put up a good initial resistance. During the first day, the Russian force only gained three kilometers, but as the German forces became weaker, the Russian forces kept coming in full force.





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1914-1942

Just before dark, Russian General Vatutin ordered his tanks to attack throughout the night, taking the Germans by surprise. By November 4, the Russians had blocked off the northern road and rail links into the city so the Germans could not replenish their forces from those directions. On November 5, Soviet troops poured into Kiev.

The German's last hope was for reinforcements through Fastov, a city 50 km southwest of Kiev. General Hoth knew that the 25th Panzer Division was en route from Germany. If it could land and assemble for counterattack, then the Germans might be able to reclaim Kiev. On November 5/6, Hoth quickly dispatched the 7th Panzer-Division\* to Fastov, with the order to hold the rail line.

On November 6, the Russians reclaimed Kiev. Soviet tanks pursued the Germans south to Fastov, arriving on November 7, as the German 7th Panzer-Division was trying to build a defense around the town.

Meanwhile, the German 25th Panzer-Division arrived at Fastov as reinforcements for the battle-weary Germans, but they were hardly a formidable force. An armored division arrived first, without its armor. The Division lacked both training and essential equipment. As they assembled, there was confusion on the German line. The 25th Panzer-Division was supposed to be deployed on the right flank, but it was deployed on the left.

The Soviet tanks attacked, and the disorganized German units suffered many casualties. Fastov fell to the Soviets on Sunday, November 7, and Isaac Loewen fell with it. Neta's notification letter said Isaac had disappeared in a "surprise night attack," so it may have occurred before dawn on the north end of town. He had been seen in a bunker just before a tank fired at it; but the Germans retreated so rapidly they could not return to collect the dead or wounded. He was officially listed as missing in action a month before his 30th birthday.

By early January, 1944, the German Army had been expelled from Ukraine. In their two and a half years there, they caused massive destruction. Approximately 10 million Ukrainians died between 1941-45, one out of every five. Many were killed by war, hunger, and the Holocaust.

Isaac was just one insignificant German soldier out of millions who died on the eastern front, but to his wife, who struggled to raise their children on her own in another country, and for his four children, who grew up without knowing their father, it was a loss that mattered significantly and shaped each one in different ways.



Soviet tanks rolled over the scrambling German forces in Fastov, sending them into hasty retreat.



Fastov railway station during occupation , 1941-43.

The Germans were trying to hold onto the railroad so that reinforcements could land and help repel the Soviet attack.



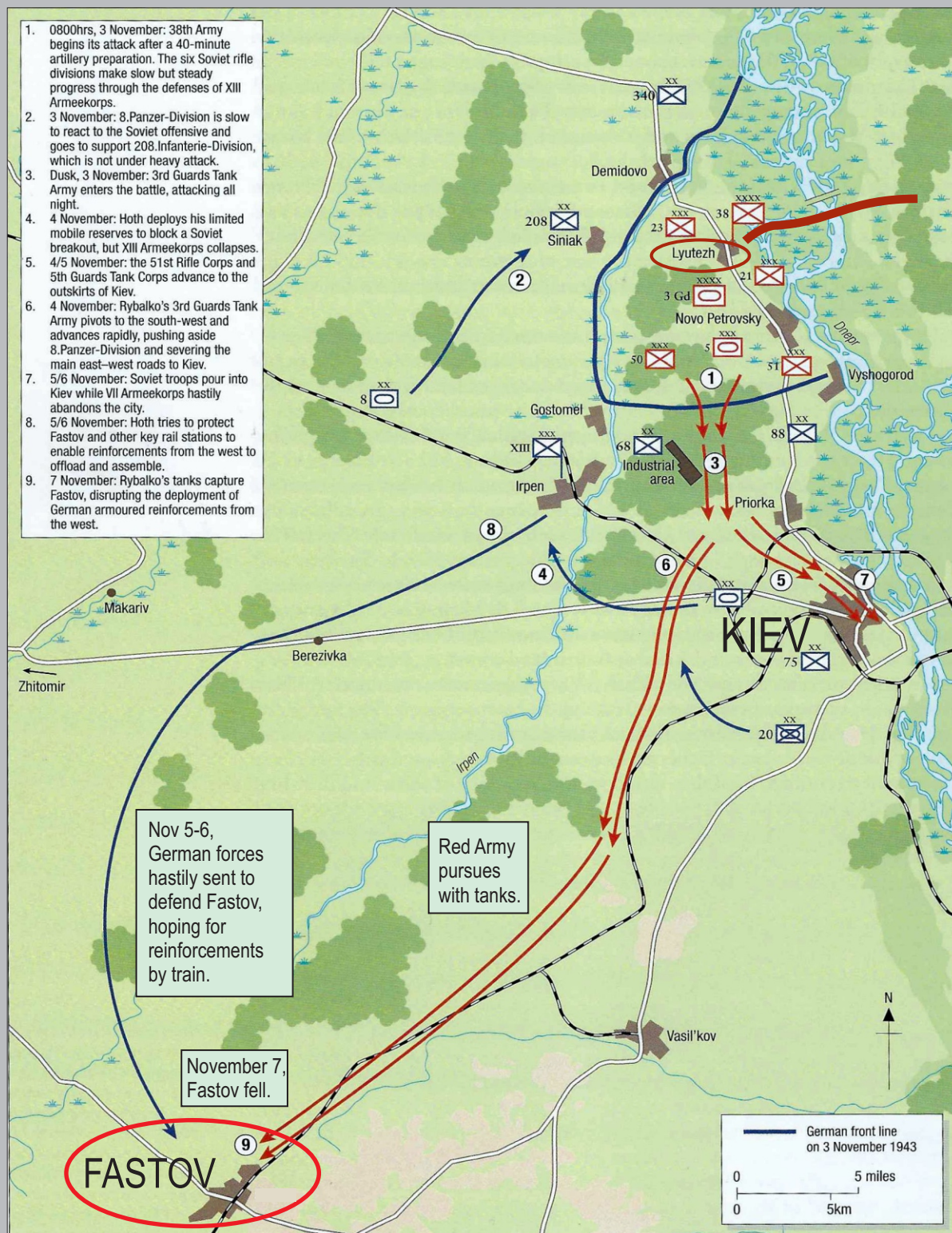
Fastov railway station after liberation on November 7, 1943.

\*Isaac's final wartime assignment was likely with the 7. Panzer-Division (Wehrmacht). Their engagements through the Eastern Front movements are compatible with his wartime service.



# BATTLE OF KIEV

November 3-Nov 7, 1943



In a stealth maneuver, the Red Army's 38th Tank Army assembled at the Lyutezh bridgehead with tanks, Oct 25-Nov 2.

Nov 3, Soviets begin artillery fire at 8 a.m. Russians bomb all night. Germans flee by Nov 5/6 as Soviets take over Kiev.

Map from *The Dnepr 1943: Hitler's Eastern Rampart Crumbles* by Robert Forczyk, illustrated by Steve Noon.





Fastov railway station during occupation , 1941-43



Fastov railway station after Liberation on November 7



Street fight in Kiev during liberation.



Soviet tanks in vicinity of Kiev, November 6, 1943



Battle of Kiev



Battle of Kiev



# ISAAC FRITZ LOEWEN

1914-1942

Galubten Neta. Am 9. 3. 1938. Jers.  
Nun Neta der heute so ein schöner Tag  
ist, und mir die Trübsal-Lust gegeben  
hat, so wünsche ich dir ein ganzes Gutes  
zu schreiben. Zuversich ist aber nicht  
schreiben, wünsche ich dir mit Kindern  
die beste Gesundheit, und das beste Wesen-  
gen, daß, so die das liebe Gott mag  
schicken. Gesund bin ich ja auch bis jetzt  
zu sagen noch. Ja Neta, das liebe Trübsal  
kannst du nicht, wenn du es nicht  
magst dich besinnen, daß ich auch gesund  
wäre und sag, wie du noch immer was-  
tig wirst mit den Kindern, oder was  
die Kinder noch immer machen, dann sag  
mir die Beside der Kinder über besinn,  
bist du recht gesund und mit der Schin-  
ding für ich, Beside und so nicht sagst  
du kommt was schaffen für ich? Und wie  
sagt mir sie so gesund und in der Beside  
oder zu sagen, ganz gut, oder sagst du

Dear Neta,

I have a little time today to answer your letters. But first, I wish you and the children good health and happiness, that our loving heavenly Father might grant it to you. Thank God I am healthy too, but I can't say that I feel blessed.

Neta, I'm so happy that you were able to make a few happy moments for the children at Christmas time. How did you manage all winter? Did Helen go to school all winter? Did you have enough warm clothing for her? How did she behave at school and at home? And, Little Agnes, is she in good health now? By now little Fred is also walking. How I would love to visit you! What a joy it would be for me to see the children and you up close.



# ISAAC FRITZ LOEWEN

1914-1942

weil Versicherung kintem gegeben mit  
ist? <sup>Wann</sup> Es muss das mit ist für eine gute  
Gefund, aber das kleine Fritz ist eine  
eine den Linsen, auf das würde das  
muss werden nun Lust für die muss  
allen zu sein. Ja Vater, das Winter kann  
man sagen, das ist fast fertig, was ist  
nicht so bald kommen sein das was  
ein Winter, aber immer sind wir so das  
ganz oder, was so das Winter kann,  
dann ist ein den ganzen Januar und  
eine den selben Februar drüber gehen  
sein, nicht nur über Tage sondern eine das  
Wasser, dann wir haben fast den ganzen Zeit  
über gewirkt, und eine immer eine den  
Hofen. Aber jetzt haben wir eine Hofen  
werden eine immer Hellen das Wasser geflossen  
den, und sind was das Tage eine immer  
frischen Hellen am Hofenwasser, so immer  
ganz schön Hellen zum Lachen, aber  
jetzt ist ja so nicht so unzufrieden, dann  
das Wasser ist ja noch im neuen Kald

Neta, please do not sell my equipment. I will need it later when I'm at home again. Then I will fix our home as we like it.

Winter is almost over now. It wasn't as cold as last winter. I spent all January and half of February outside, on the back of horses, not just during the day but also at night. Believe me, I could tell from what direction the wind was blowing. But now we've been in one place for three weeks already. I hope to hear from you soon.

With much love, your Isaac



# IN MEMORIAM



**A memorial halfway around the world.** The only place in the world where these three Loewen brothers are memorialized is at Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kitchener, Ontario. Isaak's brother, Jake Loewen, and sister-in-law Helen, put the Loewen brothers' names on a plaque to mark their deaths.



Bethel Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche was founded in 1949 by German immigrants and Displaced Persons who came from all over Europe to settle in Canada. The congregation grew rapidly, and by 1956 there was a congregation of 1000. The church had a German-Language School, theater groups, choirs, bands, and youth group. From the 1980s on, services were held in English as well as German.



Kitchener, Ontario is in the Great Lakes region.