

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

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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 damn 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.