

A German POW in a Soviet Camp ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

A German POW in a Soviet Camp

Prisoners of war had been kept in the camp I was sent to for several years, and the sights that greeted us were frightful. Everything was filthy, and the barrack walls were covered with bedbugs. After several days each newcomer was assigned to a work brigade. Because I could speak Russian, I was put in charge of a brigade of 40 men. All were German POWs who had recently arrived and were still strong to some degree.

We were required to walk to the coal fields, a distance of three kilometers each morning, and work until 5 o'clock. It was very hard work. Since we were fresh in camp we still had some strength and could accomplish it. But the strength of the prisoners waned with each passing day--the work was heavy and the food was very meager. Our daily ration was 600 grams (21 ounces) of bread, a little soup and a little porridge, twice a day. It was no wonder that after three months many became ill. The main illness was dysentery. Those ill with dysentery received no medical treatment. If the food had been better, their bodies could have fought the disease, but no one cared about these people. They were allowed to rest until they had strength to return to the mines. But most who had dysentery were unable to work again even if they survived. They were like living corpses in the camp. My brigade had started off with 43 men and after several months we were only ten. The rest had died. I was given new recruits who had recently arrived and were still somewhat strong, so the work continued. The cry was for more coal. The state needed more and more coal.

Those who died in camp were piled on a wagon and taken behind the camp about 100 meters where they were dumped into a large hole. All winter long the hole was not covered. It was the duty of the sick to take care of the dead, but they did not have the strength to cover the graves. So the next day and the day after more dead would be added, so the graves remained open until spring when it was easier to shovel the thawed dirt.

A mass grave, like the one that Gerhard described, remained open all winter, and new bodies of German POWs were daily added to the grave.



The Soviet government considered forced labor of captured Germans to be part of German war reparations for the damage that Nazi Germany had inflicted on the USSR during World War II. Many Germans were deported to the USSR after World War II to work as forced laborers in the Donbas mines.



Daily rations were so meager that many fell ill with dysentery or died. "They were like living corpses in the camp," recalls Gerhard. His brigade started out with 43 men, and after several months, there were only ten left.



GERHARD ♦ My Identity is Discovered

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



My Identity Is Discovered

During the day we worked, and during the night we were tormented by bedbugs. There were so many that one could not possibly kill them all. We had no straw mattresses, or pillows or blankets. We lay on bare boards, and wore the clothes in which we had worked all day. There was a bath house in camp where we could have taken a bath, but the men were too weak to make the effort to walk to the bath house.

The winter went by slowly. In March of 1946, I crushed my finger as I was repairing a wagon. I could not work, so I took the opportunity to wash my clothes. We had no soap, so washing our clothes amounted to rinsing them out in warm water. The camp was deserted. I noticed a young woman approach the laundry house. At first I thought she must be an officer's wife, coming to do the laundry since one section of the laundry had been designated for the officers and their wives. However, she came into the prisoners' section and asked me in good German, "Where is the bath house?" I pointed it out to her. We had no further conversation; she continued on her

German POWs in dirty uniforms. Most Gulag prisoners had just one set of clothing, the outfit they were arrested in, in which they lived and worked day after day. They might add to their clothing by stealing or taking from the dead. Gerhard's injury afforded him a brief respite to launder his clothes; but it was dangerous to be singled out in the camps for any reason.

way, and I returned to my barracks. There was something about the young woman that made me feel uneasy. I had a feeling that this meeting would have bad consequences for me. And I was right.

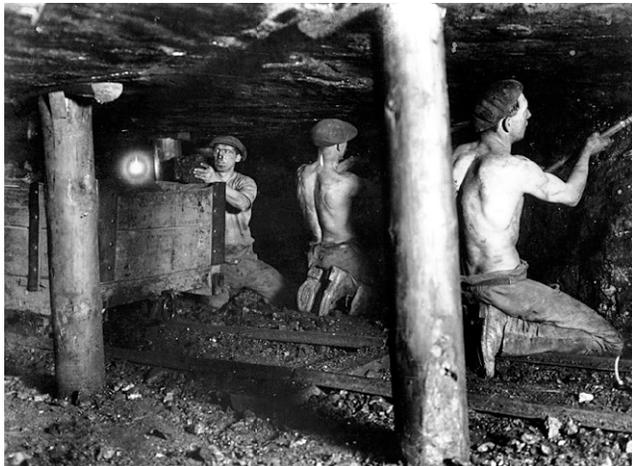
At midnight, I was awakened by a guard who summoned me to come to the camp police office. I was very much surprised to see the young lady I had met earlier in the day also in the room. The first questions she asked me was, "Do you recognize me?" I answered, "No." She said with a light-hearted laugh, "Mr. Dyck, you have a bad memory. You must remember me. I was your student in Klein Neudorf." She told me her name, and at once I recalled her. When I had entered the camp, I had given false identification because I wanted to be reunited with my family in Germany. This woman knew who I was and my Russian past. She had already told the Russian officer my whole history: that I was Gerhard Dyck, that I had been a teacher in Klein Neudorf, that her sister had worked with me in the same school, that she had been my student when she was 15 years old, and that I had been a guest in their home. I knew this would not turn out well for me.



Gerhard was in the Gulag laundry washing his clothing when he was recognized by a former student from Ukraine. That evening at midnight, he was awakened for interrogation.

GERHARD ♦ Another Prison Camp & A Spy

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Once it was discovered that Gerhard was a Russian-born German, he was transferred to another camp that held only Germans from Russia and had even harsher conditions.

Another Prison Camp & A Spy

The next morning I was transferred to another camp where only prisoners of war from Russia were kept. Here I found a large contingent of Germans from Russia. We were from different areas, but it was a joy to be with other German people and the camaraderie among us was good. After being kept two weeks in isolation, I received my work assignment: it was working in another coal mine.

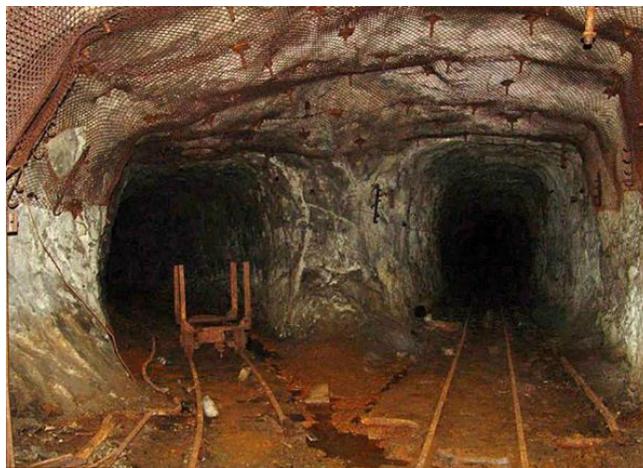
It soon became evident that a spy had been planted among us. All our conversations were reported to the authorities. At first we had spoken freely among ourselves because we thought we were all honest prisoners. But as one after another of the prisoners disappeared we became aware and suspicious that our conversations were being reported. We wondered who this spy might be. We figured out that it was Ziegler, a short German man from the Odessa area, and determined that we had to find a way to get rid of him.

*A 1946 Russian law dictated that all Gulag inmates must have a trial. Prisoners were given a 10 to 20 minute trial in front of a troika, a panel of three judges. The accused heard the charges and got to speak a few words in his or her own defense, but had no representation, no witnesses, and no opportunity to provide evidence. Gerhard was not convicted but returned to prison anyway.

Ziegler worked in our brigade. After some time, the opportunity came. In the coal fields there were no toilets. When we needed to relieve ourselves we would go into the dug out coal pits and do our business. Because coal gas gathers in these pits, we had to test for the presence of gas with a lamp check if it were safe for us to venture in. Ziegler needed to relieve himself and asked me for my lamp. I replied, "Just do your business. There is no gas." He went in, was overcome by coal gas, and so was silenced. As leader of my brigade, it was my duty to report the accident to the authorities. The secret police officer didn't believe that the death of his best informer had been accidental. I was interrogated on several occasions concerning the incident. The officer could not prove that it had been my fault, but I had made an enemy.

A Trial at Last

After a time, I was taken to another camp where I was among about 150 Russian Germans tried for war crimes. We were not required to work while we awaited our trial. Men were tried in groups of five. The trials went quickly and the three judges gave only three verdicts: ten, fifteen, or twenty years of hard labor. For some reason I was acquitted. They could not convict me of a crime. But the secret police officer from the previous camp said to me, "Even though you have been acquitted, I will destroy you."*



The German prisoners in the coal mine became aware that there was an NKVD spy among them. They sent him down a tunnel where there was coal gas, and he never came back.

A Vendetta Against Me ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



As a prisoner, Gerhard was assigned to work a double shift with no food in the foundry. There was one guard with a vendetta against him, who determined either to work him to death or to make sure he starved.

A Vendetta Against Me

After the trials, we were assigned to a foundry. Among all the workers, I was the only one who had been assigned a double shift. The first shift was from 5 pm to 1 am in a *Walzwerk* (rolling mill). It was terrible work. Because of the heat, one man could usually only load 10 blocks at a time, and then had to change with someone else. After an eight-hour day of this kind of work, one was exhausted. Because the work was so strenuous, the civilians who worked here were given a good wholesome meal. They worked from 5-8, then had a good meal and were able to continue the shift until 1 in the morning. But I was a prisoner and not given any food. I returned from my shift at 1 in the morning when I received a light supper and slept until 7. Then my day shift began.

Several months passed and I became weaker and weaker. I realized that I could not endure much more. The secret police had ordered my impossible work schedule, and forbade my shifts to be changed. The NKVD officer was determined that I would either confess who had killed his best informer, or that I should die slowly.

A DIFFERENT TYPE OF PRISONER

Post-War Gulag Inmates of the 1940s

A different type of prisoner appeared in the Gulag at the end of World War II. The camp population swelled with soldiers from many armies, including Japanese and German Prisoners of War (POWs), the Red Army, Polish Army officers, and others. These battle-hardened POWs were not easy prey for the criminals who had dominated camp life since the 1920s, unlike earlier political prisoners. They came to be called “red hats.”



There are many accounts from the post-war Gulag of red hats beginning to fight back against criminal violence, thievery, and informers. Zeks united along religious lines or ethnic groups (Russian Germans, Christians, Orthodox, Jews, Ukrainians, Latvians, and the like), and their common experiences build solidarity between them. One effect of this new solidarity was rooting out informers that had been planted into brigades and barracks. Gerhard's account of the men in his brigade ridding themselves of their informer is typical; during the late 1940s, prisoners were able to unite enough to kill many of the informers.

The government noted that if the red hats could stand up to the thieves, then they could stand up to the guards and camp administration as well. In 1948, the Gulag created 12 *osoblagi*, or “special purpose camps” and sent 275,000 of the “most dangerous” political prisoners there. These camps were for so-called spies, terrorists, Trotskyites, right-wingers, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, anarchists, white emigrants, nationalists, and others who might oppose the government. Gerhard would be among them.

GERHARD ♦ Help from Unexpected Places

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

Help From Unexpected Places

The foundry's department secretary was a young man who had an unusual interest in everything, including my situation. He had noticed that I had been singled out to work a double shift. He was studying German, and one day he asked me to help him write an exam because he thought that he would not do well. We struck a deal. I would write the exam for him if he would change my job assignment, as I needed less physical work to survive. So for several days I wrote the exam for the secretary in his office and didn't report for my shifts; he even brought me dinners. When I finished, he assigned me to a different job.

In this new job, women operated small steam-driven cranes, unloading and stacking blocks on a platform. My job was to operate big tongs alongside these cranes that grasped, guided and stacked the blocks. It was not hard work, but it required a lot of jumping up and down with my tongs. In my weakened condition, I could not work quickly enough for the crane operators. One of them took a special dislike to me, and complained about me to her supervisor. I was determined not to return to the foundry, so I exerted all my strength to do the job.

Several days passed. My shift was always from 5 pm to 1 am, and at 8 o'clock the workers took their dinner break. One evening this woman who disliked me and I drove her small crane to be filled with coal. I said to her, "Go have your dinner, and I will load the coal for you." She went into the canteen with the rest of the workers. I was nearly finished when I was shocked to feel someone's arms around me. It was this young woman! I didn't know how to respond. She asked, "What have you done that you are treated so badly?" I told her my story. She said that her husband had been killed in the war, seven years ago, and that she was lonely for male companionship. I didn't know how to answer her, and could only respond with the Russian saying, "It is bread that keeps one warm, not fur." She understood my meaning and asked if I never longed for female companionship. I



Gerhard grew weaker from overwork and starvation, but a fellow worker had compassion on him and brought him food.

told her that my entire mind was consumed with survival and that I had not given love or sex much thought in a long time. She said, "It is astonishing that one can bring young men so low that they no longer have any interest in the opposite sex." It was true. She climbed on her crane and we quietly finished the shift.

The next day when she went to have her supper, she secretly slipped me a package of food. She said, "I will bring you food every day so that you will get stronger and your tormentor will not destroy you." I was moved by her kindness. Part of me did not want to accept her gift, but the hunger pains overcame my scruples. I sat down and opened her parcel, which contained a bottle of beer, about 400 g (14 oz) of bread, and a little piece of pork. I ate the food and fell asleep. It took some effort on her part to wake me, and when she did, I could hardly move. She was frightened that the food had been too much for me and that I might die. Starving people's bodies sometimes cannot handle food, and that had been a lot of food for me. I could not work the rest of the shift, but I recovered.

This lady and I became best of friends. Every day she secretly brought me food. On her days off, she sent it with other workers. Slowly, I became stronger. My tormenter, who kept track of my physical condition, could not understand why I was not dead yet. At first he concluded that the weight I had gained indicated that I was in the last stages of starvation, but he had me examined by the doctor who confirmed that I was getting stronger. When my tormenter realized that he had been betrayed, he was determined to find out who was feeding me. He never found out, and in the end he was the one who lost.

This lady and I were the best of friends, but we could not be together because of the difference in our status. I was a prisoner and confined to my barracks each night, while she was a free woman who lived outside of camp. She said eventually I would receive my freedom, and she would join me wherever I would be. That was not to be.

GERHARD ♦ A Promise of Freedom & Vanquished Hope

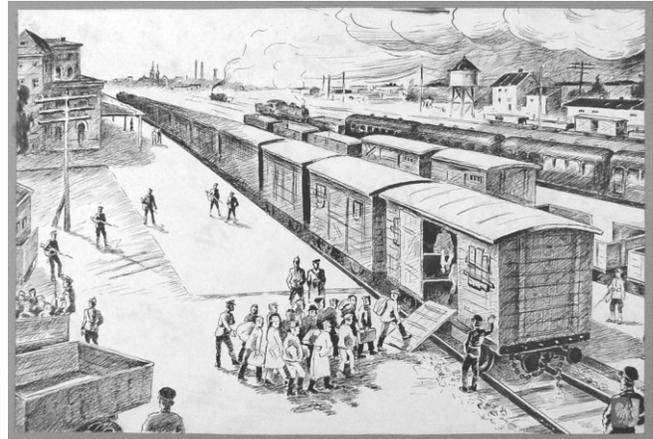
Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

A Promise of Freedom & Vanquished Hope

On October 1, 1948, the other German workers and I received an order not to return to work. We were told that we would receive our freedom. Since we were Germans, we could not return to Ukraine, but would instead go to Uzbekistan, which had a warmer climate. Twenty-five of us Russian-Germans packed our few things and left our barracks, thinking we were now free men. To our great disappointment, a police contingent met us at the gates. One of our men asked, "Where is our freedom?" "You are criminals," the police told us, "and you might commit more crime. We cannot let you just walk away unaccompanied." They ordered us into a truck, and under guard, brought us to the train station. We were ordered into a rail wagon, a guard was posted, and the door was locked. This was our freedom!

The next day the train headed into unfamiliar territory. After a day we arrived at the Volga. A train of about 20 wagons was assembled, men, women, and children of all ages who were being banished, some for not fulfilling their quota of work days in a kolhoz. Our wagon was coupled to this train, and after several days we arrived at Omsk. The entire group were ordered out of the cars and marched through the city under heavy guard to the delousing center. The citizens of Omsk thought this humiliation of even the children was an outrage. They shouted at the guards, but the people were quickly disbursed.

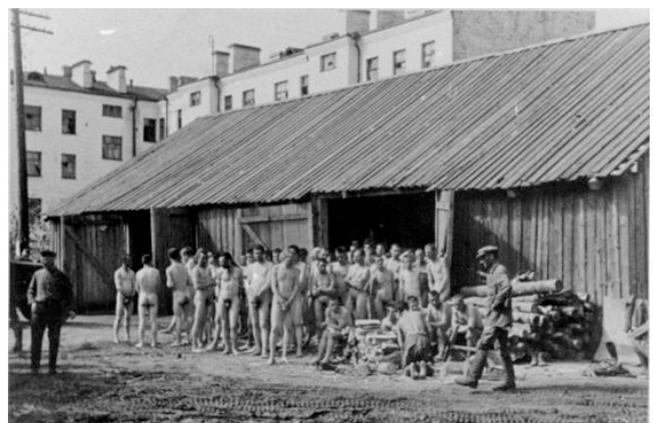
When we arrived at the delousing center, the women and children undressed and delivered their clothes for delousing, then were ordered into public showers. When the guards thought that they was taking too long, they ordered the men to undress also, deliver their clothes, and join the women. All these men, women, young men, young girls and children had to stand bare-naked together for four hours until our clothes were returned. It was a great humiliation for all of us. Then we were marched again back to our train, the car doors were locked, and the journey continued. We asked the guard several times where we were being taken. In answer each time he sang a little Russian ditty, which says, "Kolyma has 11 months of winter and one month of summer." We perceived it would be a cold place. It turned out they were taking us to Siberia.



The prisoners were promised freedom, then herded by the NKVD onto cattle cars for a month-long journey to Siberia. Their "freedom" was actually exile into the far north.

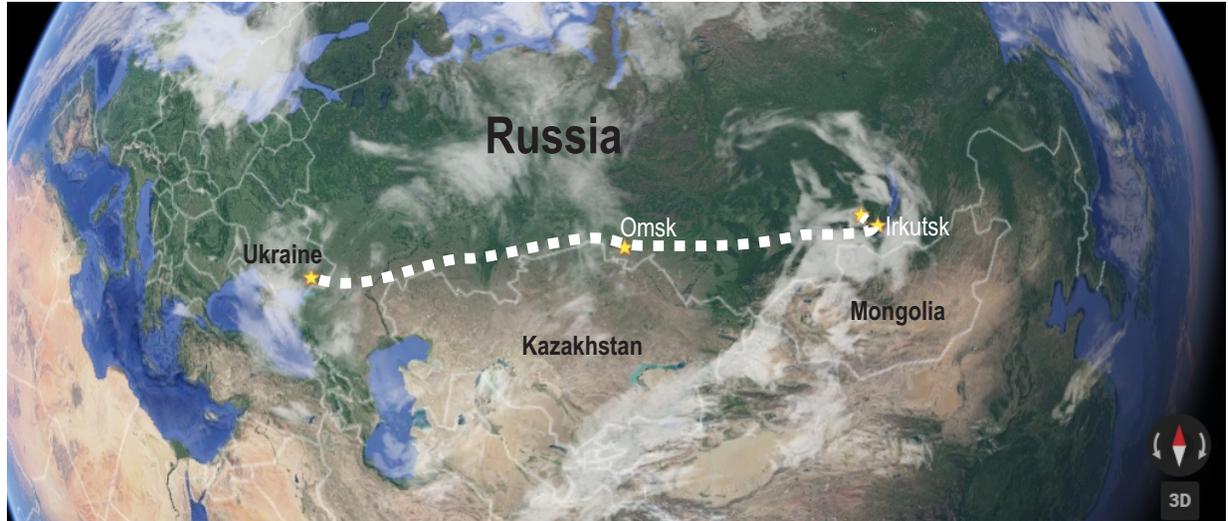


Prisoners being deloused at a center.



Guards required the prisoners to strip and stand publicly naked for four hours during delousing until their clothes were returned. Men, women and children stood naked together as a form of public humiliation. The Russian citizens of Omsk were outraged, and protested on their behalf until the guards sent them away.

A Promise of Freedom & Vanquished Hope ♦ **GERHARD**
Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard was sent a huge distance away from his home in Ukraine for his exile in Siberia.