

GERHARD

GERHARD DYCK (1917-2006)

Recorded by Gerhard Dyck, 1997;
Translated by Agnes Ferngren, July 26, 1997

GERHARD ♦ Quiet Times in Nieder-Chortitza

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

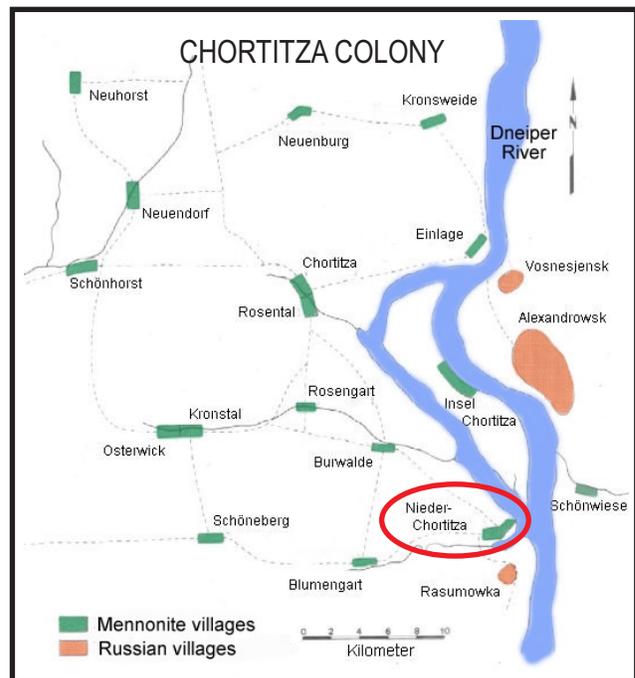
I am Gerhard Dyck, born June 8, 1917, in Nieder-Chortitza, Ukraine, by the beautiful Dnieper River. During my boyhood years, the Dnieper was a source of delight and fascination to me. All summer long, we swam and fished in its waters, and in winter it turned into an ice rink where we skated and played winter sports. My life's wish since then has been to live somewhere on the Dnieper or near some other body of water. Now I live in Linz, Germany, on the banks of the Rhine.

Nieder-Chortitza, a quiet village, was established in 1803 on the west bank of the Dnieper, where the river divides into two arms, forming Chortitza Island. The main Mennonite colony was established in 1789 in Chortitza, on the east bank of the Dnieper, 18 km from Nieder-Chortitza. Our forefathers came from the area around Danzig in Prussia, in response to the invitation by Catherine the Great, Czarina of Russia, to settle the Ukrainian steppes. The new immigrants, being hard workers, became prosperous, and most had large houses, beautiful gardens, and orchards. All were Mennonites, and adhered strictly to that faith system. It was a closed community and only Mennonites lived in the village. When I grew up there, the village was comprised of approximately 600 people. The only people of another nationality were the blacksmith and two herders.

Gerhard Dyck grew up in Nieder-Chortitza, a small Mennonite town along the banks of the Dnieper River in Ukraine. He swam and fished in the river in the summertime, and ice skated on it in the winter.



The Chortitza colony was one of two large Mennonite settlements in the Ukraine. The Mennonites had been invited by Catherine the Great in 1789 to come and settle in colonies along the Dnieper River. They would be given religious freedom and land. Many German-speaking Mennonites came to live in Russia.



A close-up map of the Chortitza colony, highlighting Nieder-Chortitza, where Gerhard Dyck spent his childhood with his family. His father had a mill right on the river. Zaporizhia, the largest Russian city, was formerly called Alexandrowsk.

Harder Times ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

We were not a farming family. My father owned a windmill, which stood on the edge of town. We were not rich, but my father was able to provide for his family of six children. As a young child, I was fascinated by visits to the windmill. It always intrigued me how brown kernels of grain dumped into one chute could come out as white flour from another.

In 1925, I started school. The Nieder-Chortitza School occupied a nice building, where grades 1 through 4 were conducted. The official language of instruction was high German. At home the Mennonites spoke a dialect, called Low-German or "*Platt deutsch*," and as a people group we came to be known as "Platt-deutsche". I was a good student, learned easily, and studied diligently. My teachers were Mr. Enns and Mr. Dyck. I attended the village school from 1925 to 1929. In June, 1929, I was among the fourth graders who had completed the course of studies and were therefore taken on a field trip up the Dnieper River in a steamship. It was a wonderful outing, and the first trip I remember taking.

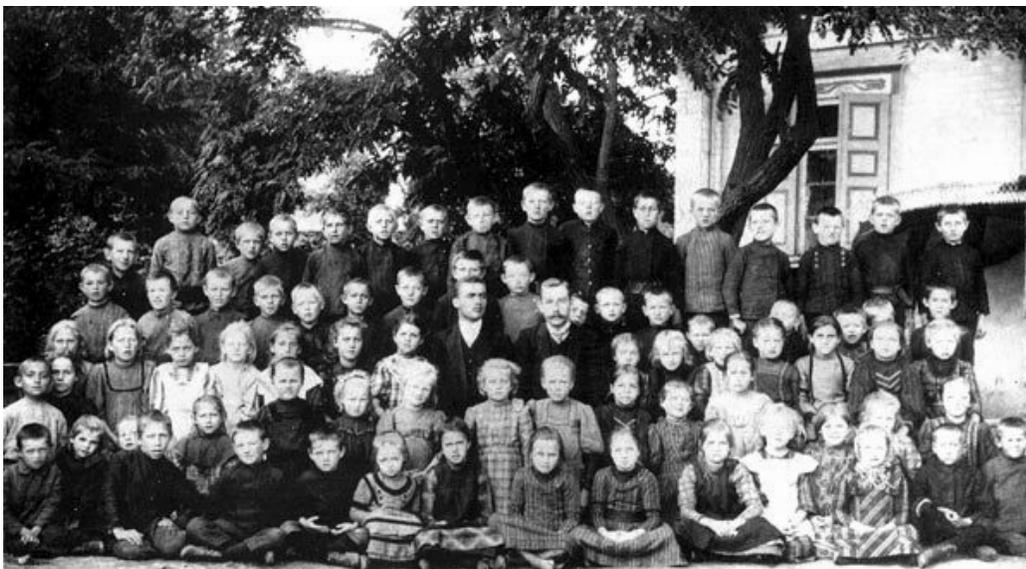
Harder Times

The situation in my family changed when my father's windmill was destroyed in a very large storm one night. The morning after the storm, his means of support for his family lay in splinters on the ground. There was a second windmill on the other end of town, where he now became an employed miller.



Gerhard's father owned a windmill on the edge of town. One night, a storm destroyed the windmill, and from then on, the family suffered economically.

Picture: Remnants of a Mennonite windmill from Ukraine.



The Nieder-Chortitza school, around 1913. Gerhard and his siblings would have been here a few years after this photo was taken. There were usually two teachers at the school; in this photograph, they are sitting in the middle. In Gerhard's day, his teachers were Mr. Enns and Mr. Dyck.

GERHARD ♦ Harder Times

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In 1928, my father became seriously ill. The doctors in Chortitz could not diagnose his illness and he could find no medical help. He slowly became weaker and sicker, and in June, 1929, he died. This had a tremendous impact on the family. With the breadwinner gone, it now became the responsibility of our mother to support the family; at this time we were seven children. There was no public assistance of any kind. We had a small house, two horses, a cow, and a few chickens, and we owned 12 hectares of land. This we began to cultivate to support ourselves. We needed everything in the way of farm implements. It was a heavy burden for our mother to keep the farm going and we became very poor. Our relatives were not able to help us.



Gerhard lost his father when he was 12. His family of 8 suddenly had no breadwinner, and the family became very poor.

Our grandmother had four daughters who were all married and each had a large family, so it was important that we be self-sufficient. We joined together with other poor families in order to help one another at harvest time.

Our two horses were not a particularly handsome pair. One was a large brown horse, and the other was much smaller and reddish in color. They were so unevenly matched that the larger one did most of the work. Most of the other farmers had strong healthy horses, and our pair often evoked smiles and snickers among the villagers when our team came along the street.

Dekulakization

At this time, Soviet propaganda began to put pressure on the farmers, urging them to unite and work



A Soviet propaganda poster from Moscow in 1930 that reads, "Throw kulaks out of your way, those damned enemies of collectivization!"

Source: <http://redavantgarde.com>

Collectivization and nationalization of agriculture were necessary for communism to succeed. The biggest objectors were the wealthy and educated. To rid himself of opposition to collectivization, Stalin created class warfare. "Kulaks," (people who had more than everyone else, like wealthy landholders, farmers, factory owners, or even teachers), were supposedly "exploiters of the working class," and the entire class was liquidated. Kulaks were driven out of their homes and off their land, and sent to labor camps. Their property was confiscated and taken over by the government.



A kulak forces a peasant to pull his cart laden with "capitalist riches."

Dekulakization ♦ GERHARD

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their land collectively. The larger estate owners were accused of being “kulaks,” or enemies of the state. At the beginning of 1929, the kulaks began to be heavily taxed, then their property was confiscated and “collectivized,” and shortly thereafter they were evicted from their land and deported to unknown destinations. Most were taken to Siberia from where they never returned. Persecution spread to the small farmers as well.

The poorer element of the population was encouraged to unite. We were in this category; we had little in material goods and my mother was a widow, so we were often visited by those who promised paradise on earth if we would convert to their ways. I remember one person who visited us on numerous occasions. He painted a rosy picture of what life on a collective farm would be like. “When you press a black button, you will get dark bread, when you press a white button, you will get white bread; when you need a new dress, go to the store and select whatever you want and you can take it because everything will belong to you.” He spun stories that stretched our imagination. Anything was said to convince the people that the new movement would be infinitely better than the present system. Naturally, my mother was not taken in, she knew it was only propaganda and remained steadfast in her opposition. All the people were opposed. Finally, the farms were collectivized against the will of the people. Those who opposed openly were deported.



Soviet propaganda posters display the idea of a community working together in harmony for the common good. In truth, even many of the common people thought that collectivization was unfair and did not support it.



“Kulaks” being driven out of their home and off their land. Entire families were families were deported to Siberia or executed.



A propaganda poster calling for collectivization. “Our two horses and our cow were taken into the kolkhoz, and now we had nothing,” remembers Gerhard.

GERHARD ♦ Collective Farms & Starvation

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard worked on the collective farm between the ages of 12 and 14.



Mennonite men working on a collective farm.



A guard prevented workers from taking grain. The government got its quota first.



People began to starve to death by 1932. There were 30,000 deaths per day.

Collective Farms & Starvation

In 1929 we became members of a collective farm, or *kolkhoz*. Our two horses and our cow were taken into the *kolkhoz* and now we owned nothing.

I worked on the *kolkhoz* between 1929 and 1931, although I was only 12 when I started. I had finished fourth grade at our village school, and the middle school in town was not yet organized.

All people of working age had to report daily for work. No one received any wages. Records were kept of how many days each person worked, and at the end of the harvest season, the workers were paid in produce for the whole year's labor. The state took its quota first. This was always very high. What was left was divided among the workers. The wage was calculated in this way: for each day a person worked, he received 100 grams of wheat. Multiply that by the number of days worked, and that was the salary for the year. For example, if a person had worked 365 days in one year, he would receive 36,500 grams of wheat which was 36 1/2 kilos (80 pounds). So the worker brought home his salary for the entire year in one sack.

Despite good crops, a terrible famine swept across the land. This was an artificial famine and instigated by the government to suppress the people. No one had enough to eat. We all became very weak, but we were still expected to do heavy work. The workers began to fill their pockets with produce. We did not consider

Collective farm workers were paid only after the government had taken its quota. There was so little left that might receive their entire year's salary home in one 80-pound sack.



Collective Farms & Starvation ♦ GERHARD

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Harvested grain was exported from Ukraine. Some went to Russian industrial centers to feed factory workers; some was exported out of the country to fund industrialization. The workers who harvested it were left to starve.

this stealing because we could not work if we had no strength. The government did not see it this way. They hired watchmen who rode around the fields on horses and cracked whips among the people. The watchmen searched the workers before they left the fields. Pockets had to be turned inside out to see if anyone was taking anything home. If caught, punishment was severe. For each kilo (2.2 pounds) of grain “stolen,” one received one year in a labor camp. The people began to look like shadows and many died. The biggest problem for our mother was how she could keep her six children and herself alive.



A foreign paper, the Daily Express, published news of the famine in August, 1934. Soviet newspapers did not mention the event at all.

COLLECTIVIZATION IS A SUCCESS

According to Joseph Stalin, 1934



In a speech on January 26, 1934 to high-ranking Party members, Stalin declared that collectivization had been a huge success.

“It becomes absolutely clear that... the collective farms and the individual peasants have completely exchanged roles: the collective farms... have become the predominant force in agriculture, whereas the individual peasants have become a secondary force and are compelled to subordinate and adapt themselves to the collective-farm system.

It must be admitted that the laboring peasantry, our Soviet peasantry, has completely and irrevocably taken its stand under the Red banner of socialism. Naturally, this historic victory over the exploiters could not but lead to a radical improvement in the material standard of the working people and in their conditions of life generally. The elimination of the parasitic classes has led to the disappearance of the exploitation of man by man. With the disappearance of kulak bondage, poverty in the countryside has disappeared...

The abolition of exploitation, the abolition of unemployment in the towns, and the abolition of poverty in the countryside are historic achievements in the material condition of the working people that are beyond even the dreams of the workers and peasants even in the most “democratic” of the bourgeois countries.

Marxists Internet Archive (2008)

Collective Farms & Starvation ♦ GERHARD

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Collective Farms & Starvation

In 1929 we became members of a collective farm, or kolkhoz. Our two horses and our cow were taken into the kolkhoz and now we owned nothing. Every day all people of working age had to report for work. No one received any wages. Records were kept of how many days each person worked, and at the end of the harvest season, the workers were paid in produce for the whole year's labor. The state took its quota first. This was always very high. What was left was divided among the workers. The wage was calculated in this way: for each day a person worked, he received 100 grams of wheat. Multiply that by the number of days worked, and that was the salary for the year. For example, if a person had worked 365 days in one year, he would receive 36,500 grams of wheat which was 36 1/2 kilos (80 pounds). So the worker brought home his salary for the entire year in one sack.



Collective workers loading sacks of grain. Workers were paid in grain, but received inadequate wages. They brought home the entire year's salary in one 80-pound sack.

Despite good crops, a terrible famine swept across the land. This was an artificial famine and instigated by the government to suppress the people. No one had enough to eat, and we became very weak. Yet we were expected to do heavy work. The workers began to fill their pockets with produce. We did not consider this stealing. We could not work if we had no strength. The government did not see it this way. They hired watchmen who rode around the fields on horses and cracked whips among the people. The watchmen searched the workers

before they left the fields. Pockets had to be turned inside out to see if anyone was taking anything home. If caught, punishment was severe. For each kilo (2.2 pounds) of grain "stolen," one received one year in a labor camp. The people began to look like shadows and many died. The biggest problem for our mother was how she could keep her six children and herself alive.

Between 1929 and 1931, I also worked on the kolkhoz, although I was only 12 when I started. I had finished fourth grade at our village school, and the middle school was not yet organized.



Mennonite men working on a Soviet Collective Farm.



Gerhard worked on the collective farm between the ages of 12 and 14.

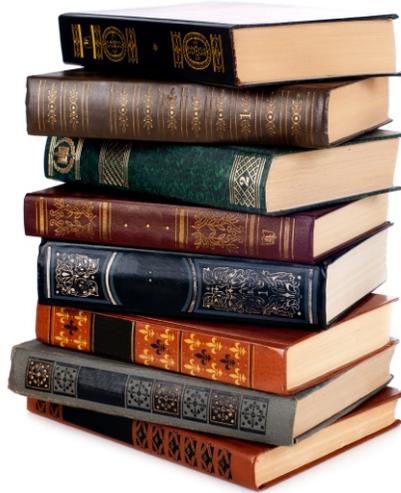
GERHARD ♦ Attending School During the Holodomor

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

Attending School During the Holodomor Famine

In 1931 the middle school in Nieder-Chortitza opened and I continued my education. Here I studied three years, and finished in 1934. I was one of the best students. I was not able to go to school every day, however, because I was too weak from starvation. Then the kolkhoz organized a feeding program for the school children. The best students were given a little food at school each day, and I was able to complete my course of studies.

I attended this school for several years and finished as the top student. At the graduation ceremony, I was called to the platform to receive a prize as top student. The prize was several books and writing tablets. My mother, who attended the ceremony, was delighted that I had received this recognition. But I came down from the platform in tears, went to my mother and said, "They should have given me a piece of bread instead of these books. Then at least I would have had something in my stomach."



Gerhard attended school in Nieder-Chortitza in 1931-34, during the Holodomor, or the Starvation Famine. He graduated as top student, and cried when his reward was a stack of books instead of some food.

Those were hard times. We had nothing to eat and nothing to wear.

Because I had been the top student in the school, I received a scholarship to attend the Chortitza Pedagogy Technical Institute to enter the teacher training program. Four girls and I from our school were admitted into this program. This program trained teachers for the German schools in Russia.

My scholarship was for 90 rubles a month. This was to provide my living expenses while at school. I lived with my aunt. Her son Henry Loewen was also a student at the technical school. I planned carefully to live within my means. At that time 1 kilo of black bread cost 90 kopeks, and sometimes I had 3 rubles left over to visit the theater. My aunt was a kind person, and sometimes she would invite me to share soup with them when we arrived home from the institute. Even though I was one of the worst dressed students in the school, there was absolutely no money for clothes. The other students, most of whom had fathers, were better dressed.



Gerhard attended the Chortitza Pedagogical Institute, a co-educational teacher-training school, for three years, 1934-37.



The Central School (Zentralschule) in Chortitza was a separate secondary school. Mennonites had many schools.

New Clothes, New Language ♦ GERHARD

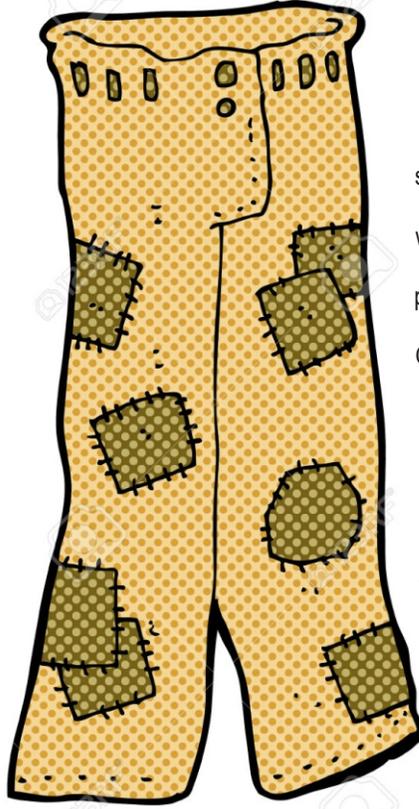
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I was in my second year of study at the Pedagogy Technical Institute when I was invited to join the choir. I loved music and had a good voice. One day while we were rehearsing for a performance, my teacher asked me to remain after class. He wanted to speak with me. When we were alone, he said, "Gerhard, you cannot perform in those clothes. Your pants are ripped in the seat." I knew that. I was wearing the entire wardrobe I owned--one patched shirt, and one pair of pants which had been patched numerous times, and had ripped again. That is what I wore, day in and day out, in winter as well as in summer. I owned nothing else. Then he said, "Come home with me." He gave me a pair of his own pants, not new, but totally unpatched! This was the first pair of unpatched pants I had owned in my life. When I performed in my unpatched pants, I felt as if I were the best dressed person in the choir! Many people today cannot imagine what I am talking about. They have no understanding of the poverty in which we lived.

At this time, the government gave no thought to its citizens. Its resources all went to build up the state quickly, produce more weapons, build more industry. The state was consumed by fear of being overthrown by the western powers, and everything went into producing weapons. Its citizens were of little concern.

New Clothes, New Language, and Principal Problems

I graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in 1937 and received my first teaching assignment in a town not far from Odessa. Again I faced two major obstacles. How was I to travel there without money? And how could I as a teacher dress appropriately for my position when I owned only one pair of pants and one shirt? To this day I do not know how my mother managed to find the money for me to travel to Odessa,



Having no father meant that Gerhard was among the poorest in his community. When he studied to be a teacher in Chortitza, his entire wardrobe was a pair of ripped pants and a patched shirt, which he wore every day. Gerhard's teacher took him to his house and gave him a used pair of pants, the first unpatched pants Gerhard ever had in his life.



and where she found the material for a new shirt. I arrived at my new post, Klein Neudorf, a German village. The people of Klein Neudorf had immigrated from Schwabenland, Germany, and spoke the Schwabig dialect, which was a new language for me. They seemed to be better off economically. They had large estates, large vineyards, and tobacco fields. They sold their wines at a nearby market in Odessa.

I found room and board for one hundred rubles a month with a lady who had two daughters, one my age and one a little younger. One hundred rubles was quite a sum at that time. My landlady was a good person. She saw that I was dirt poor, and said to me, "Teachers are highly respected and set an example for the community. Since you need clothes, I will not take your rent money for the first few months. Buy some clothes first, and later you can pay your rent."

So with my first two months' salary, I went to Odessa and bought clothes. I bought a suit for 250 rubles, a shirt, shoes, an undershirt and briefs. I put on my new clothes and felt as if I were the richest man in all of Odessa. It was the first time in my life I had worn underclothes. Later I settled my account with my land lady.

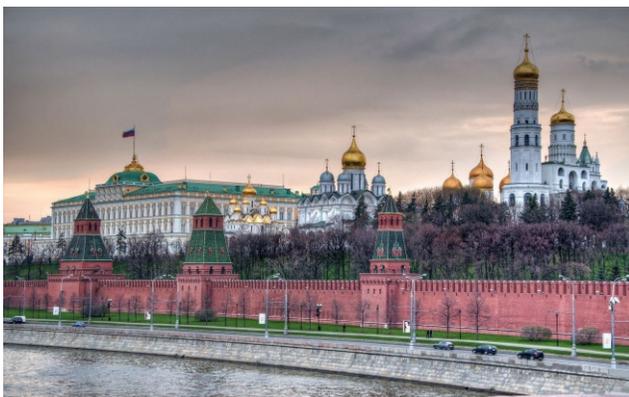
GERHARD ♦ New Language & Principal Problems

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

Life in Klein Neudorf was lonely. The people were friendly, but I was a young person and longed for the company of other young people; but there were few in town. My landlady had hoped that I would marry one of her daughters, but marriage was of no interest to me at the time. I was too young and was more concerned with my profession and getting a few clothes. The other teachers were all married and spent their evenings with their families, so outside school I did not have much to do with them. I remained one year in Klein Neudorf. Although the dialect spoken was *Schwabig*, in time I began to understand it.

The following summer I returned to my home. The folks of our village were happy to see me and amazed at my transformation. I had left as a poor country boy, and returned a well-dressed professional. My mother had thoughts of finding me a wife, but the girls she picked out for me I was not attracted to. I felt I was too young for marriage and there were other things I needed to work out in my own mind first.

At the end of the summer in 1938 I returned to my former school in Klein Neudorf. What changes had taken place! The teachers were assembled and told that beginning immediately, all instruction would be conducted in the Russian language. The German schools were closed. We teachers were all German, and spoke German as our primary language. We had studied Russian and Ukrainian languages as secondary languages, and although we could understand Ukrainian, we couldn't speak Russian. We now faced a big dilemma--how could we continue in our profes-



In 1938, the Kremlin decreed that instruction occur in Russian in every Soviet school, a problem for German-speaking Gerhard. One likely rationale for this decision was an anticipation of war.



Gerhard's first teaching post was in Klein Neudorf, a German-Lutheran village in western Ukraine. His mother somehow found the money for him to travel to Odessa, and to buy material to make him a second shirt. The people of Klein Neudorf spoke a different dialect of German, sold their wines in Odessa, and seemed to be wealthier than the Chortitza Mennonites. Today, Klein Neudorf is called Novoselivka.

sion? The school officials considered my age, and thought that I was young and teachable, so I was transferred to a larger school with more specialists who would be able to help me. In August of 1938 I found myself in a much larger middle school which went through Grade 10. The principal was a Ukrainian lady. She was concerned that we learn Russian, so she herself conducted Russian language classes every evening for us German teachers. I was busy with my own students, teaching two Grade 4 classes, and each evening we had to attend Russian language lessons. It was not the best way to learn the language, but all our students were German too and did not notice our terrible Russian.

I became aware that the principal paid special attention to me. She was 35 (I was 22) and she smoked. I did not appreciate her advances, and when she saw that her affections were not returned, she became angry and threatened to fire me. She finally let me go in March of 1939. I took my things and went to the school administration in Odessa to discuss my case. The lady with whom I met understood on what grounds I had been dismissed, was sympathetic and offered to help me. She said, "We have a vacancy for a German teacher in the high school. I would like you to fill that position since you know German." I



After being fired by a principal whose affections he did not return in Klein Neudorf, Gerhard found a teaching position in Odessa, which was more to his liking. Gerhard was a young teacher and friendly with his students; and they taught him Russian outside of class.

was delighted to accept her offer. It turned out that the Ukrainian principal unknowingly had done me a good turn.

I found myself in a better position and began teaching the German language in a Russian high school. My students were all the same age as I was, between 20-22. I had much to learn. I knew very little Russian. To teach German was no problem for me, but to explain everything in Russian was a problem. But my students were most understanding. It was their suggestion that in school I would be their teacher, but outside of school I would be their friend. My students corrected my Russian, and in time I learned Russian quite well. My students and I were friends. Evenings we gathered to sing and make music, or we went on picnics and had a good time.

As a young man, music was my first love. I could spend the whole day singing or playing the guitar, mandolin, and balalaika. I had organized a music circle in the school. It was customary in this Ukrainian village for the young people to promenade in the evenings and

sing. I had a good voice and enjoyed this custom very much. Sometimes it could also present problems. I was popular with the girls. One evening after the customary promenade, I walked one of the girls home. She had been my former student. She made it obvious that she was very much in love with me, although I could not return her affections to the same degree. However, after some time we became closer and one evening we went too far in our affections. I knew we had done wrong, but had no thought that there might be consequences of our actions.

During that summer I was required to attend the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages and could not go home until after I had passed the examination in 1940.



Gerhard loved music, and played the guitar, mandolin, and balalaika. He organized a music group, and would promenade with the young people in the evenings and sing, which was a Ukrainian custom. His musical abilities made him popular with the girls.

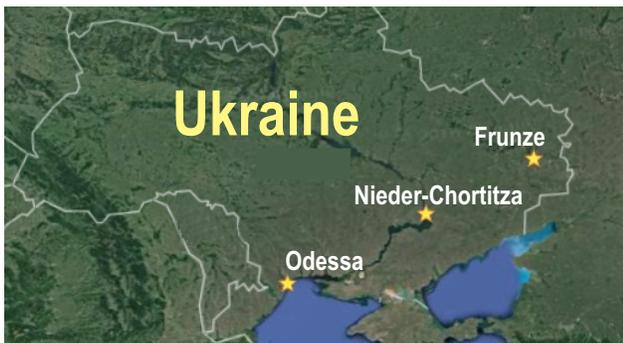


GERHARD ♦ A Quick Marriage

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard returned from a summer's training in Moscow to find that he had gotten a local girl pregnant. His choices were to marry her or lose his teaching position. He married Nina, who was only 18 at the time, in 1939, when he was 23. The young couple lived with Nina's parents, who helped support them.



Gerhard got a new teaching position in Frunze, Ukraine, a long way from Odessa. His young bride did not want to leave her parents, so she stayed in Odessa for the first year Gerhard taught in Frunze. In 1941, she came to join him.

A Quick Marriage

After the summer I returned to my school. A big surprise awaited me. The director of the school greeted me coldly and accused me of most unseemly behavior. To my utter surprise I was informed that the girl with whom I had been intimate was pregnant. The girl's mother was an influential person in the town. In my naivete I could not understand how such a thing could have happened. I had never been in love before, and did not know much about the consequences of a sexual act. I had done it one time and had been caught. It was a terrible blow. The director gave me a choice: either I marry the girl or I would be dismissed from my teaching post. I concluded I had to marry the girl. And so I married Nina in 1939. She was only 18, and I was almost 23. Naturally, her parents and the school had concluded that the fault was all mine, and the girl shared none of the guilt.

So we now had to make our life together. Nina finished her studies at the Odessa High School, and in June 1940 our first daughter was born. She is living today. She is nearly 58 years old and has two grandchildren.

At first we lived with my wife's parents. Her parents tried to help us in many ways, and were supportive of our marriage.

For the 1940-41 school year I was transferred to a middle school in Frunze. This school was much larger and had many more teachers. Nina did not want to come with me to Frunze and remained with her parents. It was a stressful situation for me. I was a teacher in a new location and lived as a single person, separated from my wife. I found living quarters where I could bring my wife and child, and they joined me in Frunze in the spring of 1941. We now lived as a family. I was busy at the school and she was home with our baby. My salary was barely adequate to support a wife and child and her parents continued to help us.

War with Germany (1941)

Starting in June 1941, life took a dramatic turn for me. On the evening of June 21, 1941 we celebrated the completion of another school year and the 10th grade students who were graduating from school car-

War With Germany (1941) ♦ GERHARD

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ried their festivities into the night. Suddenly at 4 a.m. the night sky was pierced by sirens and the drone of airplanes. We lived only 25 miles from the border of the Ukraine, and the airplanes were German bombers. We could not grasp what was happening. The target of the air raid seemed to be a facility (Alterrei Einheit) very close to where I lived. The entire facility was destroyed. The terrible explosions were very near, and I crouched in a ditch during the entire air raid. Fortunately, Nina and our daughter had gone to visit her parents. The next morning we learned that war had broken out with Germany.

Now all the young teachers were assembled and had to register for the war. When I was called up, the officer said, "We don't need someone like you." I did not understand why I had been singled out and rejected. I was offended. Later I understood the reason was because I was German and was happy for it. I did not have to go to the front, but could remain at home to carry on my normal activities.

I packed my belongings and joined my wife who was staying with her parents in Odessa. The war had started on June 21, and by July German soldiers occupied Odessa. We had heard so much propaganda against the Germans. We were told that when the German soldiers would arrive they would rape our women, tie the men to the tanks and shoot them, the children would have their eyes gouged out. All the propaganda about the German army proved to be false. No one was raped, no one was robbed, the troops entered peaceably, stayed one night and one day, and moved on. Only one officer remained in the town.



German troops at the Soviet state border marker, June 22, 1941.



German soldiers advanced rapidly through Ukraine. The war started on June 21, 1941, and by July, German soldiers occupied Ukraine. They took over Odessa on October 16, 1941.

German Stuka dive-bombers heading toward the Dnieper River and Crimea on November 6, 1941.

GERHARD ♦ War With Germany (1941)

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

One warm day in July, I had gone to the school to visit with the teachers. We were deep in conversation speculating what the future might hold for us now. As we talked, we watched military troops approaching the village and did not recognize the uniform. These were the German troops. They marched into our school, pushed us aside, and occupied the entire school. The officers set up their quarters in our classrooms as we stood outside and watched. The soldiers paid us no notice. They acted as if they were at home. The Russian teachers told me, "You speak German talk to them!" Finally one of the teachers approached an officer and pointed to me. The officer could not understand what he wanted, and said to him in German, "What is it you want? Why are you pointing to that man?" I answered, "I am German." The officer was astonished. "How is it possible that a German can be found in this area?" He immediately invited me and the other teachers back into the classroom, and we talked, with me as the interpreter. He brought out a bottle of French wine and glasses, and before long we were deep in conversation. The officer was very interested in all our questions. He thought that the war would be over in a couple of weeks. I said that I thought a war begun with Russia would not be won by the opposing forces. He seemed to be somewhat taken aback by my comment and I wondered if I had angered him. But he was quiet for awhile and later he said to me, "You may very well be right." We were now under German occupation and had to ac-



The invading German officer who took over Gerhard's school was amazed to find a German-speaker in Odessa. He invited Gerhard and the other teachers into a classroom, poured French wine, and talked with them about the German plans for the war. Gerhard served as translator. The German officer said he hoped the war would be over in a few weeks. Gerhard told them he didn't think an invasion of Russia could be won by the invading force. "You may very well be right," the officer said.

commodate ourselves to the new government.

It was July, and the crops were ready for harvesting. The German officer, who had himself been a landowner, called a meeting with me serving as interpreter. He made a short speech to this effect: "You have a beautiful crop standing in the field. The crop is yours but you must find a way to harvest it." Then he



German plans for invading Russia in Operation Barbarossa.



The German officer, a landowner, called a town meeting with Gerhard serving as interpreter. He instructed the people to elect a mayor to harvest and distribute their wheat crop. The people organized a quick election for mayor and brought in their wheat.

Leaving Russia ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

organized a quick election for mayor who would oversee the harvesting of the crops. So the harvest was brought in during the remaining days of July and during August. It was the mayor's responsibility to distribute the crop among the people. Each household received an amount proportional to its size. At the end of harvest season, the people found they had plenty of wheat and a surplus. The government was requested to find a market for the surplus. The produce was taken to Odessa and exchanged for other items. So a barter system was established between the farmers and the city people. In the villages the greatest need was for salt, soap and clothing. People from Odessa exchanged salt and soap for eggs, bread and other produce. Both the city people and the country people benefitted from this exchange. I am still amazed today at what people can accomplish when they are given their freedom and the opportunity to act within that freedom.

When the new school year approached, we teachers began to teach in the German schools. I was transferred to Neudorf, a German town. Here in Neudorf I was assigned to a house with a garden and small vineyard. I was also given a cow, and now I had the double role of teacher and farmer. My teaching salary was 80 marks a month and the produce from the garden was a big help financially. But there was still nothing to buy in the store and we were espe-

cially in need of clothes. In 1942 we had our second baby, a son. We were now a family of four.

After a short time, the area was transferred to Romanian administration. The German villages (about 20), however, remained under the control of the German SS. In each German village was an office of a German representative. In Neudorf where I taught, the German headquarters were established. Until March 13, 1944, for approximately three years, we lived under German occupation. During summer vacation, the teachers were required to attend classes where they were indoctrinated into German politics in order to better understand the new German nation.

Leaving Russia

On March 13, 1944 the order came that the Germans in Russia had to leave Russia and emigrate to Germany. As teachers we were given a wagon and two horses from the German government. We loaded our possessions onto the wagon and made a tent-like covering over it for protection. We were six people on the wagon, my family of four and another teacher and his mother. It was a very difficult journey, especially for our young children. We were on the open roads and highways, whether it rained or snowed. There was no place to find shelter. Neither the Romanians nor the Hungarians accepted us into



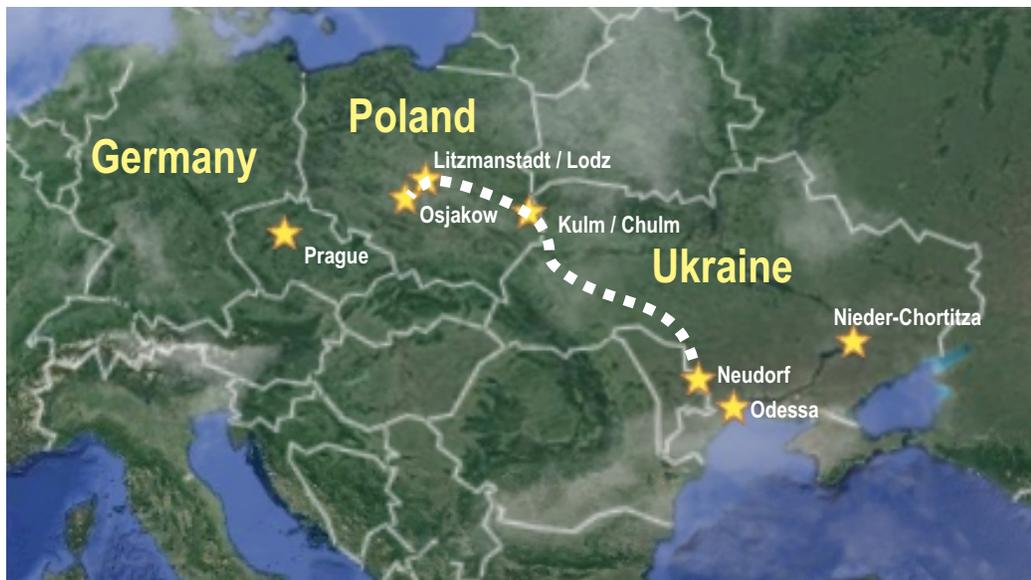
Under German occupation, Gerhard taught in Neudorf, a small German town outside Odessa. He had a house with a small vineyard and a cow. The German villages were placed under the control of the German SS. They lived under German occupation for 3 years. (Now called Komarivka, Moldova)



The people in the countryside and the city set up a barter system to exchange goods. It was the establishment of a free market system after 15 years of communism. "I am still amazed at what people can accomplish when they are given their freedom and the opportunity to act within that freedom," Gerhard recalled.

GERHARD ♦ A Soldier in the German Army

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard, Nina, and their two children traveled by horse and wagon from Ukraine all the way to Poland, March to June, 1944. It was a very difficult journey. They were on the open roads and highways and exposed to the elements in rain and snow. Neither the Romanians nor the Hungarians accepted them into their homes when they asked for shelter. They did not stop until they arrived in Kulm, Wartigau, Poland.

their homes when we asked for shelter. Regardless of the weather, we were confined to our wagon by day and night. We could not stop until we arrived in Kulm, Wartigau, in Poland.

In June 1944, we were transferred to Litzmanstadt, Poland, where we were deloused, and then transferred to the village of Osjakowa, on the Weizel River. We settled here temporarily. I was assigned to a position in the registrar's department in the mayor's office, a position which a Pole had formerly held. He was dismissed and I replaced him. I knew the Ukrainian language which is similar to Polish, so I was able to make myself understood with the Polish people.



In July, all German refugees were naturalized. Because my wife was not German, I ran into difficulty with the administration. I was severely reprimanded that I had married someone who was not German. They pressured me to separate from my family, send my wife and children back to Russia, and marry a German girl. I withstood their pressure, determined to keep my family together.

A Soldier in the German Army

In October, 1944, all who had been naturalized were called up for active duty. I had to report to Prague, where I trained as a motorist and served in the anti-aircraft division. We were on duty long hours and had little rest. During the day we served as motorists, and during the night we were on alert for air raids. The war had not gone well and Germany was exhausted. Our diet consisted mainly of kohlrabi (of the turnip family), potatoes and a little bread. We did not get enough food, and were constantly hungry. Although the stores in Prague had bread and other groceries, everything was available on ration cards only. The Czech people had bread ration cards, meat

Gerhard, Nina, and their two small children, fled Ukraine on a horse-drawn wagon. Pictured: a WWII refugee family.

A Soldier in the German Army ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard was naturalized as a German citizen in July, 1944, and was drafted in October, three months later. By then, the once-formidable German Army was mobilizing even boys and old men. He served in the anti-aircraft (*right*) and the motorized divisions.

ration cards, etc., but we, of course, had none. On more than one occasion I entered a bakery when the clerk and I were alone and asked if she would sell me a loaf of bread. But I was never successful; without a ration card one could not buy anything.

The Czech people were very embittered over the Germans, something I could not understand. Their men sat at home with their wives and were not required to serve in the military, yet they complained about the government. I often said to them, "A time will come when Russia will destroy you, and then you will have to dance to Russian music." Naturally, this angered them. "That will never happen," they responded. They had no idea what the future held for them. And so in their blindness they hated the Germans, and wished for the British to deliver them. That was not to be their lot. After the capitulation of

Germany on May 8th, 1945, they staged an uprising, but neither the British nor the Americans came to their aid as they had hoped, and the Russians suppressed them and did with them what they wanted.

On April 10, 1945, I received orders along with the rest of the motorist division to take provisions and medicines to Vienna. The front was near Vienna, in Stockerau. So we left with our vehicles loaded with provisions and medicine for the soldiers at the front. About half way to Vienna we were met by the retreating army and ordered that we should give ourselves up to the Americans. We continued driving west day and night. Finally we arrived in Winterberg, where the Americans were. We were instructed to stop and just wait. We waited in Winterberg for three days, May 11-14, while a very large military contingent was amassed. We were waiting for further orders



Gerhard's final military assignment was to bring provisions from Prague to Vienna. The German forces were driven back toward Winterberg, where they surrendered to the Americans; and the Americans turned them over to the Soviet Army, in May, 1945.

GERHARD ♦ A Russian Prisoner of War

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Gerhard found himself back under the Russian flag, this time as a POW. "When I realized that I was now a Russian prisoner of war, I knew what terrors and suffering awaited me in the future. From this point on, I would have to fight with all my strength for survival, and try to keep hidden the fact that I had been born in Russia."



Captured Germans returning to Russia in open railway cars.



Gerhard was sentenced to work in a coal mine in the Donets Basin, a major industrial region of eastern Ukraine. It is one of the densest industrial concentrations in the world, noted for its coal and iron reserves.

from the Americans. The third day we were ordered to drive our vehicles toward Germany, and as we emerged from a forest, there stood the Russian troops waiting for us. The Americans had sent us into Russian captivity. And so we were taken prisoners of war. I came out of Russia into Germany, and from there into Russian captivity.

I have been asked how I as a Russian citizen could serve in the German military and end up as a Russian prisoner of war. It is an irony of history and I have had to accept the fact that this was the destiny determined for me from above. When I realized that I was now a Russian prisoner of war, I knew what terrors and suffering awaited me in the future. From this point on I would have to fight with all my strength for survival, and try to keep hidden the fact that I had been born in Russia.

A Russian Prisoner of War

We were divided into groups of hundreds and were marched through Czechoslovakia until we came to a river. Here the river encircled an area where 100,000 men were herded together. The area was surrounded by heavy Russian military equipment; it would have been suicide to try to escape. We were given nothing to eat for 10 days. It poured down rain on us the whole 10 days. I had a backpack in which I had a little tent, and a small supply of dry food. Each man had to look out for himself as well as he could.

After three more days during which we received some food, we were driven to the city of Plzeň (Pilsen). There, the Russians loaded us into baggage cars in groups of forty and began our journey into Russia. The next day we arrived at the Russian/Hungarian border. We were ordered out of the rail cars and assembled in a barrack where we received a piece of bread, soup and porridge. The next day we were given breakfast, then transferred into Russian rail wagons, and arrived two days later in the Ukraine in the Donets Basin, where coal is mined.

First we were taken into a receiving camp to register. We had to state our nationality and next of kin. I reported my wife as next of kin. She was in Dresden and I wanted to return to Germany and be reunited with my family. Several days later we were transferred to another camp for prisoners of war.

FALLING INTO RUSSIAN HANDS

German Prisoners of War in Soviet Captivity

Each battle the Germans lost during World War II resulted in more captured soldiers. Many German soldiers became Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs). In 1942, after the Battle of Moscow, 120,000 were captured, and in 1943, after the Battle of Stalingrad, another 91,000. Of these 211,000, all but 6,000 died in Soviet camps by 1945 from disease, starvation, and lack of medical treatment.

The Soviets sent non-military ethnic Germans to the Russian Gulag as well. Beginning in December, 1944, the Red Army deported all able-bodied Germans (men 17-45 and women 18-30) from Soviet-occupied territories such as the Balkans, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, to the USSR for forced labor. In all, about 271,600 non-military ethnic Germans were deported to the Russian Gulag, with 66,500 (24%) of these dying before they could be repatriated in 1949.



German POWs in Allied custody are marched through a town after surrendering in 1945.

The numbers of POWs grew exponentially as the Germans were defeated. By April 1945, 2 million German soldiers were prisoners of war in Soviet custody. The last battles in central Europe after the war's end on V-E Day (May 8, 1945) were caused by Axis soldiers trying to surrender to British or American troops instead of to the Soviets. The Soviets weren't known for their kindness, and treated their own surrendered soldiers like traitors (Order No. 270, 1941). In all, however, the Soviets would end up with 2.8 million POWs. In May, 1945, the US turned over hundreds of thousands of captured Germans to the Soviet Union as a "gesture of friendship." This meant death and retribution for thousands of these POWs, especially if they were Soviet-born and had sided with the enemy.

Peter Loewen, Gerhard's brother-in-law Isaac Loewen's brother, was one of these. He had been drafted into the German Army in occupied Ukraine, along with his brother Isaac, in 1942. At the war's end, he was captured and returned to Russia. The train stopped, the soldiers were ordered off, and they were all shot as traitors, their bodies thrown into a mass grave. (A survivor who escaped related the story to his family).

Peter Loewen, back right, was repatriated to the Soviet Union in 1945 and promptly executed upon his return. Here he is in Poland in 1943 with his wife and child (also standing in back), his mother (seated, right), and his sister-in-law Neta Loewen (Gerhard's sister), and her four children.



FALLING INTO RUSSIAN HANDS

German Prisoners of War in Soviet Captivity



German prisoners massed in a temporary holding area in May, 1945, prior to being moved to formal POW camps.

Gerhard Dyck was in the same predicament. His survival depended upon being able to pass as a regular German soldier, rather than a Soviet-born German who had sided with the enemy.

In a strange twist of fate, Gerhard and his future brother-in-law, Karl Kessenich (who married his sister, Anni, in 1995), were in the same large group of German soldiers in southern Czechoslovakia that the Americans turned over to the Soviets. (Karl and Gerhard first met in the 1990s.) Karl's account highlights the danger Gerhard was in as a Russian-born German:

"I was sent to an American prison camp for two days. The second night, the Americans told us that the next morning we would break camp and march 15 kilometers west; but when we started marching, they had us go east instead. The soldiers detected it right away. After we had marched five kilometers, we walked into a clearing where the Russians stood with their guns trained on us. It turns out that the Americans had given us up to the Russians (in keeping with the Yalta Agreement, 1945).

The Russian commissars separated us into groups of about 100 men. They said, "We want to know who was born in Russia. We need your names." They separated out about 50 people born in Russia and shot them.

Then we began marching in our groups of 100 men. There were a lot of us POWs, maybe 2000. Your Uncle

Gerhard and I think we were in the same bunch of POWs. A Russian guard beat us with a rifle as we marched, and we marched a long time. After two days, I escaped."

Gerhard was not so fortunate. He was sent to the Gulag for 10 years. For a time, however, the Soviets thought he was a German, which saved his life.

Many of the captured, like Gerhard, were sent to the Donets Basin to reconstruct the mines and other heavy industry in the region that had been damaged during the war; others were sent to the Ural Mountains, or other regions. The workers lived in concentration camps. Conditions were harsh, rations were scarce, and the prisoners were continually subject to mistreatment, overwork, exposure, and torment from the guards. Forced labor was inefficient and unprofitable because starving prisoners quickly became weak and production fell off. If the prisoners had been better nourished, clothed appropriately, and given proper tools for their tasks, the Soviet camps might have rendered more substantial returns. They remained, however, inefficient and unprofitable, places of torment and despair.

Once East Germany (GDR) was created in 1949, the Soviet Union released most of their German POWs to another Communist power. Eighty-five thousand, who had been convicted as war criminals, and ethnic Germans like Gerhardt, remained in Russia. They had been sentenced to 25 years or life imprisonment. These Germans were used to build up the industrial strength of the USSR.



WWII German POWs captured by the Soviets and headed for 10 years of labor camps.