

ANNI ♦ German Occupation

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



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



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



Ukrainian women giving a German soldier a drink of water.



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

German Occupation

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

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

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