

ANNI ♦ Stalin's Purges

Anni Dyck Kessenich (1926-)



Anni's brother, Hein, served in the Russian Army until he was arrested during the Purges in 1936. He was interrogated and tortured, but refused to sign a false confession penned for him. That probably saved his life. Instead, he was exiled to the Soviet Gulag (prison camp system) in Siberia, where hundreds of thousands of others were sent during this period in Russian history.



Hein's approximate location in exile, where he spent 20 years doing hard labor. He had most likely been arrested because his German nationality made his loyalty to Russia suspect.

Stalin's Purges

Toward the middle of the 1930s, around 1936, the communists started taking men away. They began by arresting people who were in the army.

My brother, Hein, and his friend were among the first ones they took from our village. They were both serving in the Russian army when they were suddenly arrested and charged with treason. Hein told me later that he was supposed to sign a confession that he was guilty of the crimes they charged him with, but he refused to sign. His friend signed a confession and was executed. Hein told his captors that they could go ahead and kill him, but he was *not* signing anything. But the communists didn't kill Hein: they sent him to Siberia instead.

Then the police "cleaned out" the villages. They drove into town at night in paddy wagons at night and took all the men away. In just one night, they arrested 74 men from Nieder-Chortitza.

One night, my mother and I were walking home after visiting Grandma. As we passed City Hall, we saw paddy wagons parked in front and knew that the secret police had come again to pick up men. We heard voices. My mother said, "Quickly, hide!" We dove under the hedge until they disappeared, and then went home. I was ten years old, and so afraid that they would take my other brother that I couldn't sleep. I prayed all night, "Please, God, don't let them take Peter, too!"

They didn't take Peter that night, but most of the men they arrested were never heard from again. A few came back from Siberia many years later, after the Mennonites had left the Ukraine. We didn't know what had happened to Hein for 20 years. We finally heard from him around 1956. He had been in Siberia all that time, working very hard. He had been tortured, too.

After they took all the men, the village population consisted of women and children and a few men. We never could understand why they arrested whom they did. The charges against those men never made sense.