

# HEIN

HEINRICH DYCK (1913-2001)

Based on recollections by Hein's sister,  
Anni Kessenich, in 2016,  
and written by Anne-Marie Nakhla in 2017.

# HEIN ♦ Early Life in Ukraine

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

**H**einrich Dyck was born on November 1, 1913, in Osterwick, Ukraine. He was the second child in his family and the first son, and called “Hein” by his family.

Hein’s childhood was marked by the Russian Revolution and Civil War, which ended a month before his ninth birthday. Times were lean and sometimes frightening, such as when bandits raided their home in the middle of the night in 1919-20, when Hein was five years old. Forced requisitioning, where communist officials would search each house and remove all the food, saying that it belonged “to the state, not the people,” meant that families had little to eat. This resulted in a famine in the Volga and Ural regions of the Soviet Union in 1921-22, where five million people died. Yet Hein’s gentle father and strong mother protected him as much as they could from the events around them. His father, Gerhard, worked a windmill in town, grinding wheat for neighbors. After his windmill was destroyed in a storm, Gerhard worked at the Friesen’s gristmill.

Even though they lived in the Soviet Union, Hein’s family and entire village was Mennonite. Their ethnic and religious identity was blended, and in the 130 years the Mennonites had lived in Russia, they had maintained their distinct identity and culture. They all spoke Low German in their homes and High German in the school and church, ate Mennonite foods, and worshiped together on Sundays.

## *Religion Discouraged at School*

When he was old enough, Hein walked to the village school with his sister, Neta, and later with younger brother Peter. In school, communist teachers sent from the city replaced the local Mennonite teachers. These new teachers preached atheism to the children. They claimed that religion was the “opiate of the masses,” foolish and backward, and ridiculed the children for their faith.

Church services had been held in the school building on Sundays, since there was no church building in town. But the congregation opted to move to Siemen’s Granary, one of the larger buildings in town, where they could escape some of the eye of the state. They held worship services there on Sunday mornings and Sunday School on Sunday afternoons. One Christmas Eve the church planned a program. The children and the choir all stood on a makeshift stage at the front of the granary. The weight was too much, and suddenly, the entire stage collapsed, causing an uproar. The program had to be postponed for a night while repairs were made, and the next night the children performed from the floor.

Eventually, though, the communists forbade all religious gatherings. Even the church in the granary ceased. An itinerant preacher, Aron Toews, would come to town from nearby Chortitza from time to time and hold secret worship services at pre-arranged times and places.



A Soviet anti-religious poster from 1924 that reads, “Ban religious holidays.”

Nieder-Chortitza’s village church met in the school building until the communists began to publicly oppose religion. Then, the Siemen family offered their granary, where the church met until religious services were forbidden. (R, Siemen’s house in Nieder-Chortitza).



# THE ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN

Replacing Religion with State Atheism (1918-1928)

Karl Marx, the founder of communism, called religion “the opiate of the masses.” Lenin claimed that religion contributed to the “stupefaction of the working class.” From the earliest days of communism in Russia, the Bolsheviks attempted to replace faith with State Atheism by persecuting the church.

**The government ended religious and ethnic privileges.** In November, 1917, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin signed *The Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia*, which ended privileges based on faith or nationality. With this act, the Mennonites lost the rest of their privileged status in Russia, including their military exemption. This also affected the Russian-Orthodox Church, which had long been tied to and funded by the state.

**Religious Instruction of Youth Was Prohibited.** In January, 1918, officials forbade religious instruction in schools. On June 13, 1921, religious instruction of anyone under the age of 18 was forbidden.

**The Bolsheviks murdered large numbers of clergy and believers** during the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). Those in the Orthodox Church became special targets because the church had received special privileges under the Tsars. Beginning in 1918, numerous priests were killed. Some were cut to pieces, some were beaten, some lost limbs, and one 75-year old abbot was even scalped and beheaded. The Party claimed that these people had supported the Tsar and had bourgeois sympathies. After the Civil War, persecution continued: between 1922 and 1926, 1200 Russian Orthodox priests were killed, and many more arrested, imprisoned, and exiled.

**The government seized church property and restricted church rights.** In January, 1918, Lenin issued a decree that all church property was to be nationalized. Religious organizations could no longer own property or teach religion in schools or to any minors. All theological schools were closed. Over the next few years, the state took over churches and stripped the clergy of their power. In Kharkov, Ukraine, the clergy could not baptize, marry, or bury anyone without permission of the local Soviet Executive Committee. In 1921-22, the state robbed the churches of much of their wealth in the name of “famine relief.”



A 1929 issue of *Bezbozhnik* (*The Godless*), showing workers dumping Jesus out with the garbage. The article suggests that Soviet Industrialization Day should replace the Christian holiday, Transfiguration Day.

**Anti-religious propaganda emerged.** Journals and magazines sprung up that were devoted to promoting atheism, such as *Revolution and the Church*, *Pravda* (Truth) and *League of the Militant Godless* (later shortened to *The Godless*). They portrayed religion as unscientific, and faith as a vice, rather like drunkenness or greed. The intended purpose was to justify the mistreatment of religious people.

**Religious days were desecrated.** People had to work on their days of worship, Jews on Saturdays, and Christians on Sundays.

As time passed, it became clear that religious conviction was not easy to dismantle. In 1924, Leon Trotsky warned that it would be a long struggle against religion, and any means should be used to attack it except the forced closure of churches, since he didn't



# THE ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN

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The beautiful Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow was demolished in 1931 and replaced with a public swimming pool.



The banner over the entrance of this cathedral reads: "Monks, the bloody enemies of the working people."

want to create religious martyrs. It was never officially illegal to be a believer for the same reason. Thus religious people were never officially persecuted for their faith, but for all kinds of other fabricated reasons (usually resistance to the state).

**A Reprieve in the middle-1920s.** The New Economic Policy (1924-28) gave a brief reprieve from religious persecution. To improve its reputation, the state halted its practice of murdering religious believers without trials. Controls on emigrating were also lifted, so 21,000 Mennonites left the USSR in the 1920s, seeking religious freedom in the U.S. and Canada.

The leniency didn't last. The doors for immigration closed again once Josef Stalin came to power, and in the late 1920s, the communist party began a fresh attack against religion. Groups like the Mennonites that had escaped notice during the first wave of persecution were now targeted as well.

**Institutions worked to discredit belief.** The Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) held theater performances that ridiculed religious services, and

sometimes even held services themselves, called "Komsomol Christmases" or "Komsomol Easters" where they would burn religious books and icons, and mock pictures of Christ. They held parades on Christmas and Easter, right outside churches, hoping to make worship impossible inside. The League of Militant Atheists operated from 1925 to 1947, and had 3.5 million

members by 1941. The League published newspapers, sponsored movies, held lectures and demonstrations, set up museums to discredit faith, and even visited believers to convince them that God doesn't exist. "Struggle against religion is a struggle for socialism," was the League's slogan.

Despite the state's efforts to drive out religion, many believers in the USSR remained staunchly devoted to their religious convictions. The persecution of the church was overt and ugly, and didn't win over the people as intended. The Communist Party had a way of alienating many, particularly those it threatened, disenfranchised, starved, worked, and persecuted. Faith was merely driven underground.



The magazine cover of the Soviet atheist magazine, *Society of the Godless*, depicts Jesus as a puppet of the Russian Orthodox church, which is luring in its prey.



## Better Times Under the NEP, and then Harder Times

# HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

### *Better Times Under the New Economic Policy*

Although times had been exceedingly hard during the war years, things got better beginning in 1923 under Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP abolished forced grain requisitioning, which had kept the people in a state of near-starvation, and allowed elements of a free market and capitalism to emerge. For Soviet citizens, this meant a limited return to industry. Individuals could own small businesses. They could garden, keep the proceeds, and even sell at market if they had a surplus, after paying a portion in tax to the Party. Previously, wealthy landowners had owned most of the land; but in 1924, the communists divided the land equally among citizens. Each person in a household was allotted two hectares (a hectare is about 2.5 acres) to farm. Thus, even poor families were given the means to survive.

The Dyck family was given a large field on the east side of Nieder-Chortitza, of around 18 acres. Hein's father was able to buy a wagon, two horses, a cow, a pig, and some chickens. The family was still poor, though; the wagon was rickety, the horse team unmatched, and their only farm equipment was a few rakes and hoes. Although sometimes their neighbors made snide comments about their horse team, beginning when they were 12, 11, and 9, Neta, Hein, and Peter successfully worked the fields with their father. They planted tomatoes, melons, and other crops, had a good harvest, and even had enough left over to sell. Some days Hein



In 1924, the Dyck family was given a plot of land. For a few years, times were better as they were able to work their field for food. They even harvested enough watermelon that they could sell some at a nearby market.

pulled three wagonfuls of watermelons to the ferry, where they were sold at a nearby Russian market. They were able to work that field for several years, and for a while times were better.

After the harvest, Hein's father, Gerhard, took the children across the river to the Russian city of Zaporozhia where they bought new clothes. They bought shoes several sizes too big to allow for growth, and to save the shoes from wear and tear, the kids only wore them on Sundays. The remainder of the time they went barefoot.

### *Harder Times*

In 1929, Hein's father became ill. He grew weaker, and became too sick to work. He spent more and more time in bed. Sometimes he was in acute pain, and would cry out at night. Before he died, he took Hein aside and told him, "Hein, when I'm gone, you will be the man of the house; please help your Mother." Hein was 15 when his father died in August, 1929. Services were held in the Siemen's Granary, and 42-year old Gerhard Dyck, husband and father of seven, was buried in the Nieder-Chortitza Cemetery.

As oldest son, Hein took his new role very seriously. He hauled firewood with the wagon and did other chores. But it was a time of huge social upheaval in the Soviet Union, and life was about to change in drastic ways.



**Hein and his siblings went barefoot.** They had only one pair of shoes each, which they only wore on Sundays.

# HEIN

## ◆ Collectivization & Working on the Kolkhoz

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

### *Collectivization*

By 1928, Stalin had emerged as the undisputed ruler of the Soviet Union. He wanted to drive out the last vestiges of capitalism that had crept in during the New Economic Policy and establish a fully socialist nation. Moreover, he recognized that the Soviet Union was backwards, and needed to industrialize rapidly.

In 1928, Stalin put forth a Five-Year Plan, designed to collectivize private property and industrialize the nation. This imposed enormous social and economic change upon the country. Private property was abolished, and all possessions now belonged to the state. In 1929, Stalin amended the plan to include the collectivization of agriculture, which caused major upheaval in Hein's little Mennonite village in the heart of Ukraine.

The government plan didn't reach Nieder-Chortitza until 1929. Shortly after Gerhard Dyck's death, the government confiscated the Dyck's animals and wagon. Their plot of land, along with everyone else's, became part of huge, state-run government fields on the *kolkhoz*, the collective farm. Some people's homes were confiscated and made into government offices, day care centers, or communal kitchens. Soviet officials sent search



A young kolkhoz worker (not Hein) having his lunch on the field.

parties from house to house, looking for food, clothing, and other property they could seize. Even the basic food needed to feed one's family was taken away. People who resisted were driven from their houses and sent to Siberia, being called "kulaks," tight-fisted ones. Many arrests were made of previous community leaders, who were transported to Siberia to work in labor camps. The severe treatment of the people made them resist collectivization.

### *Working on the Kolkhoz*

Hein was 15 when he began working on the new Soviet collective farm. All healthy members of society had to work; even children as young as 12, and mothers, who had to check their children into state-run day care centers to work. People were organized into brigades under the command of a brigadier or *komsomol*, and each brigade was given its own assignment. Men were usually assigned to run farm machinery, and women to load wagons and hoe fields by hand.

Hein reported each day at a large barn. He and the others had to work seven days a week. The State made no allowance for religious observance or a day of rest. The workers weren't paid for their labor in cash. The kolkhoz kept records of how many days a person worked, and at the end of the harvest, paid each of them in produce for the entire season. But payment was rationed out only after the government took its hefty quota, which didn't always leave much for the workers. A laborer could carry his entire season's salary home in a bag over his shoulder, a wage which didn't go very far in feeding a large family.



During the collectivization drive, everybody had to work to contribute to national goals. "Hard work will provide cities with bread and collective farms with machines," reads the poster.



## Starving, Threatened, Homeless, and Sick

# HEIN

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Hein worked on the kolkhoz for several years. During that time, conditions only worsened for the peasants. They were given a little soup on the field at lunchtime. It was mostly clear soup with some vegetables in it, not terribly nourishing. Overseers watched the hungry workers to make certain that they didn't eat in the fields or take anything home in their pockets. But collectivization had been thorough, and the people had no foods left in their homes. They were starving.

### *Starving, Threatened, Homeless, and Sick during the Famine of 1932-33*

One day, the plow failed to cover two potatoes, so Hein discreetly put them in his pocket to bring home to his mother. Somebody spotted him, though. That evening, two men arrived at the Dyck home, looking for Hein. They beat him up and threatened to send him to Siberia. He was so frightened that he ran away from home. He lived like a fugitive on the streets in Zaporozhia, a nearby Russian city, for several months. His family didn't know where he was.

Eventually, Hein contracted dysentery, and became very ill. He thought he was going to die, so he used his last bit of strength to get home. His sister Neta saw him first, crawling into the yard because he was too weak to stand. She ran to help him inside, but their mother refused to let him in.



**Food was so scarce during 1932-33 that Hein's family foraged for food.** He and his brothers caught field mice, and the girls collected weeds. The Holodomor Famine claimed 5 to 7 million Ukrainian lives.

She said, "I'm sorry, Neta, but dysentery is contagious. Hein has to stay in the barn until he is well." They made up a bed for him in the barn, putting blankets on the straw, and the family looked after him as well as they could. They didn't have much food to give him. Hein's friend, David Epp, was a fisherman, and he would bring over fish he had caught for Hein. David was hungry like everybody else, but he thought that Hein needed the food more than he did. Slowly, Hein recovered. After a long while, he was finally able to move back into the house.

This was during the famine of 1932-33. There was so little to eat. Hein started to scrounge for food for the family. One of the best sources he found were field mice. They lived underground. Hein took a pail of water and poured it in the mouse's hole, and as soon as the mouse came up, he grabbed it by the neck...and that was it for the mouse. Though foraging, the Dyck family had a little bit of meat, and Hein was able to help his mother keep the family alive.

**After he was caught stealing potatoes and threatened with deportation to Siberia, 19-year old Hein fled to Zaporozhia.**

This Russian city, today a center for industry, lay directly across the river from Hein's small, rural village, and he lived on the streets here for months until he became so ill that he returned home.



# HEIN

## ◆ A Red Army Soldier & the Great Purge

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

### *A Red Army Soldier*

Hein was looking for a way to support his mother and five siblings so they would not starve, having just barely survived the famine. In 1934, he enlisted in the Red Army and became a soldier, along with a friend from Nieder-Chortitza. The State had been applying pressure on Mennonites to join the armed forces, and some did, although it was a departure from Mennonite pacifism. At least joining the military did not require Communist Party membership. In 1941, only 49% of enlisted soldiers were Party members, although all of the officers had to be.

As a soldier in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Hein was stationed in Dnjepropetrovsk (today, Dnipro), an important Soviet industrial and military base. When he came home in his uniform, he got quite a few looks from the girls. His army career was short-lived, however, due to forces beyond his control.

### *The Great Purge (1936-38)*

In 1936, Stalin decided to cleanse the country of traitors, and the Great Purge began, starting within the army. It was a frightening time. Vast numbers of people were suddenly arrested, accused of crimes they hadn't committed, and executed or exiled.



Red Army recruits receiving training on rifles, 1930s.



Hein enlisted in the Red Army in 1934, but became one of the first victims of Stalin's Purges. In 1936, he was falsely accused of treason, tortured, and sent to Siberia.

Hein and his friend were the first ones arrested from Nieder-Chortitza. They were charged with treason for listening to a German radio station. Hein and his friend *did* have a radio, but they had been listening to music on it, nothing political; neither of them was even interested in politics. Both were interrogated and ordered to sign a confession. Hein's friend did, and the NKVD promptly executed him, but Hein refused to sign, even though he was tortured at length. He told his captors, "You will kill me, regardless of whether or not I sign this confession, so I won't sign it." His torture and imprisonment continued for months. He woke up one morning in his cell and didn't know who he was or where he was. When he looked in the mirror, he saw that his hair had turned white! Eventually, Hein Dyck, at 23 years old, was sentenced to hard labor in Siberia for life, and sent to the Gulag.

## Arrest & Interrogation

# HEIN

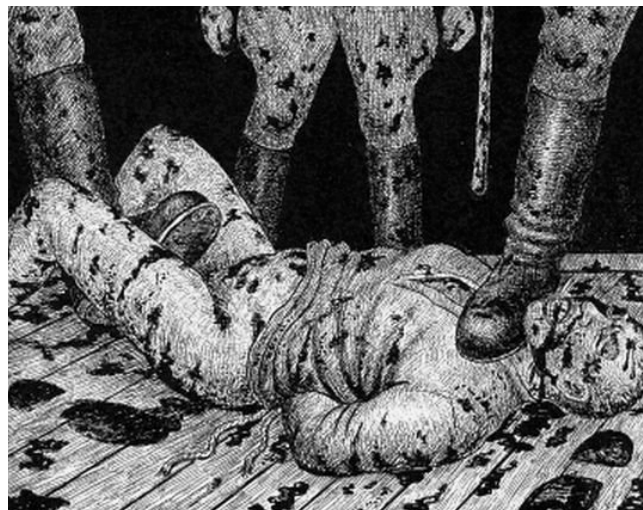
Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

What would cause Hein, a healthy young man, to lose his memory and his hair to turn white over a few months in a Stalin-era Soviet prison?

NKVD Guard Danzig Baldaev drew over 100 pictures of prisoner treatment during interrogations he witnessed and participated in. These are some of the milder ones.



Beatings, tortures, rapes, fingernail extractions, burning with cigarettes, isolation and insomnia were frequently used.

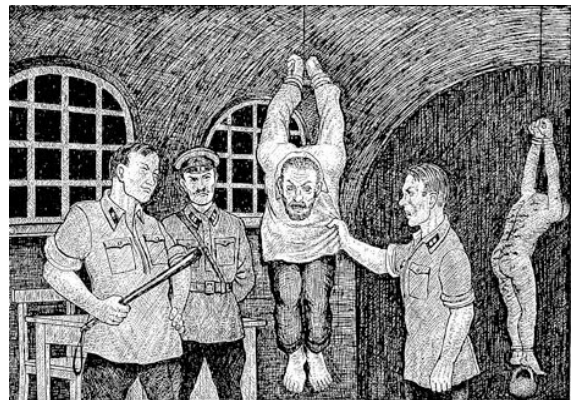


The tortures were as varied and terrible as the guards could invent, helpful in extracting false confessions of espionage.

Excessive sound or light, deprivation of food, water, or human contact caused confusion and prisoners' mental faculties to break down. Sometimes, prisoners were placed in closed boxes for hours, or in a sedimentation tank packed so tightly with others that if a prisoner died, he might remain upright in the crowd for days.



In a technique called "The Swallow," a rope was put in the prisoner's teeth like a horse's bridle, then tied around his legs so he could not move or cry out.



Prisoners were hung from their arms extended behind them while weights hung from their feet, causing excruciating dislocations. In other instances, guards attached sandbags to male genitalia.



When it was over, the prisoner would be hauled off to his cell, where he would lie in pain and dread until the next round of torture. It is no wonder there were so many false confessions and denunciations. Prisoners merely wanted their agony to be over.



# HEIN

## ◆ Kolyma: A Land Laced with Death

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)





## Kolyma: A Land Laced with Death

◆ HEIN  
Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



“The Gulag was conceived in order to transform human matter into a docile, exhausted, ill-smelling mass of individuals living only for themselves and thinking of nothing else but how to appease the constant torture of hunger, living in the instant, concerned with nothing apart from evading kicks, cold and ill treatment.”

*Jacques Rossi, Gulag prisoner for 19 years.*





# HEIN ♦ A Life Sentence in the Kolyma Gulag

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

## *A Life Sentence in the Kolyma Gulag*

To serve out his life sentence, Hein Dyck was sent to Kolyma, in Russia's far east. Kolyma had the reputation of being the coldest place on the planet. People spoke of 12 months of winter there. Temperatures regularly dipped below -50 F. It was the remotest location in the entire Soviet Gulag, and the hardest place to survive.

Gold had been discovered in the Kolyma River Valley in 1928-29, and Stalin wanted to exploit it to fund economic growth during the First Five-Year Plan. In 1931, the State founded Dalstroy, a company to oversee mining and production in the region, using prisoner labor. In February, 1932, the Head of Dalstroy, Eduard Berzin, arrived in Kolyma to begin building Gulag camps. By 1934, there were 30,000 prisoners working in those camps, mining for gold and tin, and building roads and railroads through the mountains and tundra.

To get to Kolyma, Hein and other prisoners had to endure a crowded cattle car journey thousands of miles across Russia, during which they were only given small amounts of salted herring, black bread, and water. Many died en route. When prisoners reached Vladivostok or other port cities on Russia's eastern coast, they were loaded onto "death ships" for a voyage to the port city of Magadan. Prisoners arrived in Magadan half-starved and often ill. One adult male survivor

arrived in Kolyma weighing just 83 pounds after his transport there. Then, prisoners had to march to their camps, some of which were 150 miles away.

In the first years of the Kolyma Gulag, 1932-35, Berzin allowed prisoners three "rest days" per month, and when temperatures dropped below -65 F, they were not sent outside to work. But Stalin chastised Berzin for his "lenient" treatment of prisoners in 1937, and by the time Hein got to Kolyma, prisoners no longer received days off. They had to work in the arctic tundra or open pit mines in all temperatures. Many died of overwork, starvation, and exposure, but gold output climbed.

Hein arrived in Kolyma in the fall of 1936 or spring of 1937, and was sent to one of the many prisoner camps. By then, the Kolyma Gulag was growing exponentially thanks to the Great Purge. In 1937, there were 70,000 prisoners, and by 1940, there were 140,000 dispersed among 80 camps, all administrated from Magadan, the largest city in the region. There would eventually be 130 camps in Kolyma.

Hein and the other prisoners lived in facilities surrounded by a barbed wire fence, with guard towers along the fence to prevent escape. Guards were notorious for cruelty. They were taught that their prisoners were spies, fascists, and enemies of the state, traitors who would betray their country if given a chance. Thus, they brutalized those under them, making life unbearable.

Hein was sent 6,600 miles (10,000 km) away from his home in Ukraine to the Kolyma region of Siberia.

Many prisoners were taken across Russia on the Trans-Siberian railroad to port cities like Vladivostok, then shipped to Magadan, entry port for the region, when the route was ice-free. Kolyma, a huge region six times the size of France, eventually had over 130 prison camps.



## A Life Sentence in the Kolyma Gulag

# HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



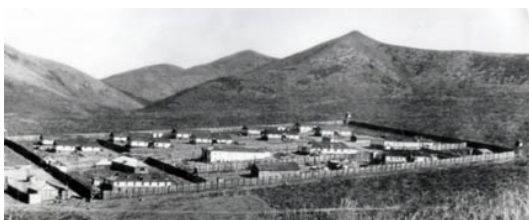
The elaborate network of prison camps throughout Kolyma was part of the Soviet Gulag. Many political prisoners served 10 and 20-year sentences in one of the Kolyma camps.



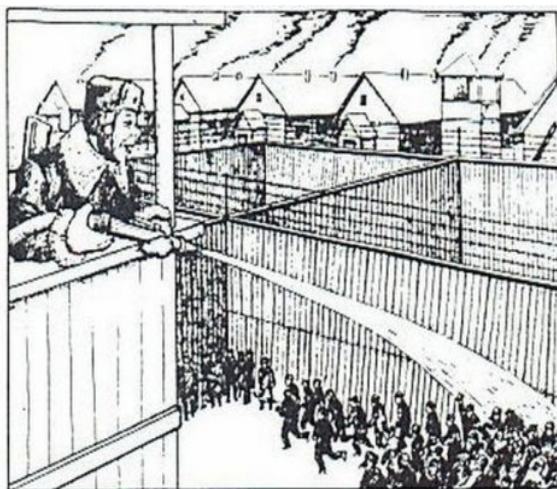
Entrance to a prisoner camp at Magadan, the entry point to Kolyma. From here, many prisoners were made to walk to remote camps in the mountains as far as 150 miles away.



Each camp looked different, but barbed wires and guard towers, twice-daily roll call, and slave labor never let the prisoners forget they were not free men and women.



Prisoners slept behind barbed wires in the camps, but left each day to walk to a work site.



Cruelty and sadism were commonplace. This drawing by former guard Danzig Baldaev, shows how new arrivals were doused with water from a fire hose as they waited outside the gates in subzero weather. After several hours, covered in ice, they were finally let in.



# HEIN

## ◆ Guard Brutality in the Kolyma Gulag

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



### THE HUNT

This cannibalistic sport was especially popular with the guard details and sentries at Camp No. 031, but it flourished everywhere throughout the Gulag given the right conditions: small groups of convicts out in the woods; automatic weapons; close range someone easy to shoot.

There was a system of incentives for guards who prevented escapes. Shoot a runner - get a new stripe on your uniform, home leave, a bonus, a medal. Hatred for the prisoners [supposedly] were S.S., they were traitors and spies. Guards were perverted both by the absolute power they were given and by the weapons they so longed to use. Convicts were generally shot down either by very young soldiers or by hardened sadists and murders.

One of the convoy detail would pick a victim and begin to stalk him. The guard would wheedle, persuade, try to lure the victim over the line. Unless a smart and savvy crew boss had warned the victim ahead of time, the deception worked. The soldier would say, "Hey! You! Go get me that little log to sit on!"

"But sir, it's off limits!"

"Not a problem. You have my permission. Go!"

The prisoner steps over the line. One quick burst of fire, and he's dead. Typical. Banal.

Sometimes the guards and sentries would actually order their victims to step over the line, or just shove or chase them out, the better to shoot them. A guard was authorized to order a convict to cross the cordon. He was also authorized to mow that same man down.

- Anatoly Zhigulin, Kolyma prisoner  
In *Gulag Voices*



An inmate strung up and carried back to camp.



A prisoner being given the "cold treatment" as punishment for some camp offense.



Guards setting dogs on a prisoner.



## Prisoner Brutality in the Kolyma Gulag

# HEIN

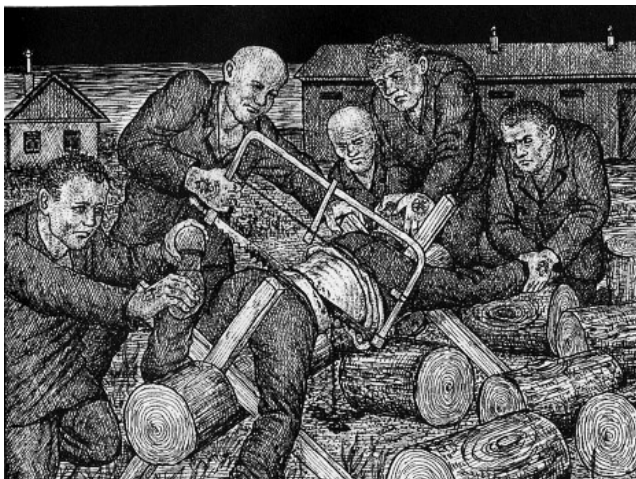
Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



One prisoner attacks another at a worksite.



One prisoner kills another with an axe, in full view of the guards. There was constant competition for survival, expressed in fighting over clothing, bunk space, jobs, rations, and favor with the guards.



A gang of thieves saw a prisoner in two. The "thieves" were hardened criminals who aided the guards in suppressing the political prisoners in exchange for better jobs and rations.

### *A Brutal Place*

Hein's memory slowly returned, but it only reminded him of what he had lost: his job, his reputation, his family, and his freedom. Nobody knew where he was, so there was no hope for help. He would have to survive on his own. He had his youth and strength to his advantage, but his German ethnicity was to his detriment. The Germans were an especially disfavored people group in the Soviet Union.

Political prisoners like Hein were called "58s" in camp because they had been arrested under Article 58 of the penal code. They were thrown together with criminals (called "thieves," although many had committed violent crimes). The 58s were beneath the thieves in camp hierarchy. Guards relied on the criminal element to help control the politicals, which they did through terror and violence. They were awarded better jobs and extra rations for suppressing the 58s.

During their few non-working hours, prisoners were crammed into over-crowded barracks where they competed for bunk space, privy time, and other necessities. It was a life and death struggle just for bread and warm clothing. Inmates slept on slat boards without pillows or bedding in wet work clothes that would be stolen otherwise. Violence often broke out among the prisoners. Hein bore a scar on his forehead where a man attacked him and tried to kill him. People developed a certain hardness of spirit, one that could cope with daily injustice, grueling work, tormenting hunger, and ubiquitous death. They made moral compromises to stay alive.

It was difficult to find companionship, even among other 58s. Prisoners were constantly watched, and couldn't speak freely even to each other. The NKVD had secret informers in the barracks and brigades, prisoners who would turn in others for advancement or privilege. The reward, better food or a job out of the cold, could save the informer's life, albeit at the expense of somebody else's.

Art by former prison guard Danzig Baldaev,  
*Drawings from the Gulag, 2010.*



# HEIN

## ◆ Life in the Kolyma Gulag

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



Prisoners assembled for roll call at the end of the day listened for the names of those who would be executed.



Another Danzig Baldaev drawing in which he shows mass executions in the camps.



Relics from the tortures in the Butugychag Camp in Kolyma.



**Eduard Berzin was the founder of the Kolyma camps.** He drove from camp to camp in Lenin's former Rolls Royce. Berzin became a victim of the Purges himself. He was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938.

### *The Purges in Kolyma*

The Purges continued everywhere in the Soviet Union, including in the remote Kolyma camps. Head of Dalstroy, Eduard Berzin, was arrested late in 1937 and shot. The next commander showed no leniency. The NKVD established execution quotas that needed to be fulfilled to purge the regime's "dangerous enemies," and nearly 6,000 people were executed in Kolyma in 1937-38. In the Zolotisty Goldfields, guards summoned a work brigade from the mine and shot them all in full daylight. At another camp, 30-50 men were killed each day, their corpses dragged off on tractor sledges. The charges were read aloud and were typical for the era: counterrevolutionary activities, failure to fulfill the quota, and espionage.

Varlam Shalamov, survivor of the camps and author of *Kolyma Tales*, wrote, "For many months there day and night, at the morning and the evening checks, innumerable execution orders were read out. In a temperature of fifty below zero the musicians from among the non-political offenders played a flourish before and after each order was read. The smoking gasoline torches ripped apart the darkness...The thin sheet on which the order was written was covered with hoarfrost, and some chief or other who was reading the order would brush the snowflakes from it with his sleeve to decipher and shout out the name of the next man on the list of those shot."

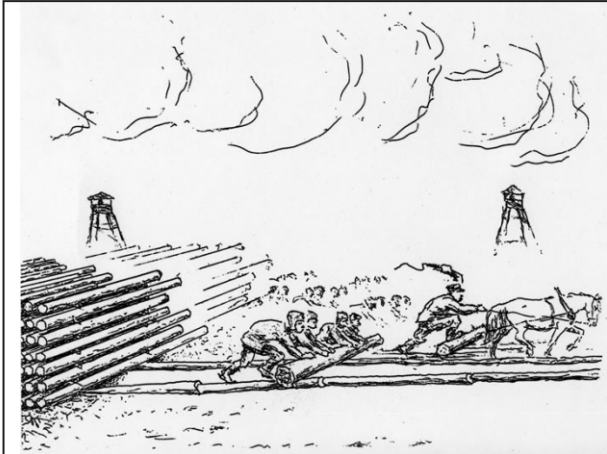
Two more commandants of Kolyma were purged as well. It appeared that no one was safe until Stalin's madness subsided, around 1940.



## *The Daily Grind*

At 5:00 in the morning, and sometimes earlier, the prisoners were awakened for their daily roll call. They stood outside in rows, sometimes for more than an hour, for the daily counting. Then they got a small daily ration, and prepared for another grueling workday.

Prisoners were organized into work brigades. Hein was assigned to the gold mines. Armed guards with attack dogs accompanied the brigade on their daily march to their work sites. Gulag prisoners worked approximately 10 hours per day in the winter and 14 hours per day in the summer, seven days a week. During winter, prisoners had to work in icy, sub-zero winds all day. In such extreme cold, it was imperative that the prisoners keep moving to avoid freezing to death.



**"Inferior to a Horse," drawing by Jacques Rossi,** who spent 19 years in the Gulag after being arrested during the Purges. He wrote, "After 11 and a half hours of labor (not including time needed to assign a task, receive tools and give them back), Prof. Kozyrev commented: 'How far Man is still from perfection. Just to think how many people and what minds are needed to do a job of one horse.'" ...The four workers were: Epifanov, who was until the Great Purge of 1937 a professor of Marxism-Leninism in the Academy of Mining in Moscow; Colonel Ivanov, a chief of a major Red Army division; Prof. Kozyrev, director of research at the Pulkovo Space Observatory in Leningrad; and myself, a secret agent of the Comintern."



A modern depiction of Gulag slave labor.

The projects these slaves of the state labored on were grand in scope, contributing to the industrial strength of the country and the Five-Year Plans. They built roads to the Kolyma gold mines through impossible terrain; or created mines deep in the hillsides with picks and shovels. In the absence of machinery or horsepower, human strength had to accomplish the most arduous tasks. Prisoners dug ditches and mines into permafrost by hand, with picks that were dull, shovels that were weak, and bodies that were emaciated.

NKVD guards oversaw fulfilling the current Five-Year Plan as well as guarding prisoners, so they slave-drove those under them. Ivan Karpunich-Braven, a former Red-Army Officer who had become a prisoner, described how others were treated: "Those who lagged behind were beaten with clubs and torn by dogs. Working in 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, they were forbidden to build fires and warm themselves. Men were hitched to a sledge and beaten by a stave... Those who did not fulfill the norm...were punished by the chief of the camp, Zeldin, in this way: In winter he ordered them to strip naked in the mine shaft, poured cold water over them, and in this state they had to run to the compound; in summer they were forced to strip naked, their hands were tied behind them to a common pole, and they were left out, tie there, under a cloud of mosquitos. Then, finally, they were simply beaten with a rifle butt and tossed into an isolator."

# HEIN

## ◆ Life in the Kolyma Gulag

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



The Kolyma Highway is called “The Road of Bones” because many died during its construction, their skeletons buried in the road’s foundations.

The railroad also cost many human lives.



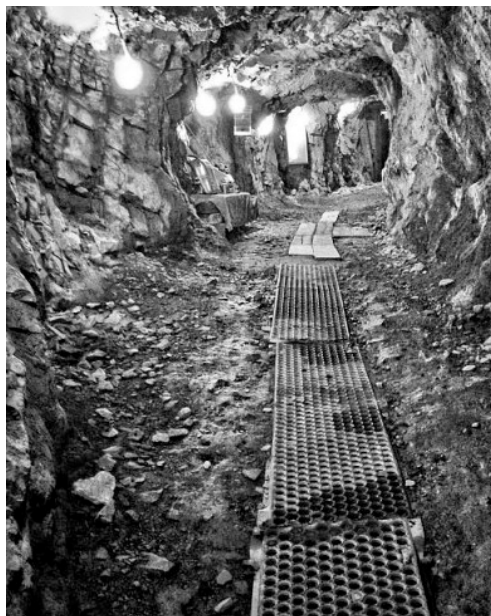
A Kolyma gold mine.

“

We have to squeeze everything out of a prisoner in the first three months. After that we don't need him anymore.

*Camp Commander Naftaly Frenkel, 1937  
Quoted by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

”



Inmates had to work in Kolyma’s gold and tin mines or outside at worksites in sub-zero temperatures. Guards would not allow them fires to make fires to warm themselves.

Hein worked in a Kolyma goldmine.



## A Life Sentence in the Kolyma Gulag

# HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

### *The Food-For-Work System*

Prisoners were fed 700 calories a day, one chunk of bread and some form of cabbage soup. Scurvy was rampant from a lack of Vitamin C and many prisoners experienced its symptoms: muscle pain, bruising, sore gums, and tooth loss.

The Gulag used a food-for-work system. Those who completed their daily quota of work received a full ration. Those who failed to meet their daily quota had their rations cut, and if they failed to meet their daily work quota day after day, they became known as “goners.” They slowly starved to death in full view of others, their weak and fading forms a reminder to the others in camp of how close death was. Although too weak to walk, they were still expected to work, dragged to work sites by other prisoners on sledges. Prisoners were so hungry that they ate anything. They ate a week-old horse corpse covered in flies and maggots. They ate a barrel of lubricating grease brought to



A “goner” was someone in camp too weak to work, who was no longer given his daily ration. His presence reminded other prisoners of their precarious fate.

*Drawing by Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia, former Gulag prisoner.*



**Hein spent time in solitary confinement, where he was starved in a tiny cell. He was saved by his singing.**

Here is a sketch of a prisoner in solitary confinement, drawn by Jacques Rossi, who wrote, “A lesson to learn: How to distribute your body on the planks trying to avoid excessive suffering? A position on your back means all your bones are in direct painful contact with wood... To sleep on your belly is equally uncomfortable. Until you sleep on your right side with your left knee pushed against your chest, you counterbalance the weight of your left hip and relieve the right side of your rib cage. You leave your right arm along the body, and put your right... cheekbone against the back of your left hand.”

grease wheelbarrows. They ate moss, like the Arctic reindeer.

At one point during his imprisonment, Hein was put into solitary confinement. He was given no food for days, and it appeared that the authorities intended to starve him to death. Hein, who had a beautiful bass voice and knew many German hymns and folk songs, sang to keep his spirits up. Someone in authority heard him singing from his cell and decided that he sang too beautifully to die, so Hein was released back into the general population of the labor camp.

When World War II broke out in 1941, news trickled into the work camps with newly-arriving prisoners. The guards silenced the radios when the war was going badly on the Soviet front, but they threatened prisoners with distant events: “If Stalingrad falls, we will shoot all of you.” As far removed as the inmates were from the front, they felt wartime deprivations keenly. The prisoners were given more work, less food, and harsher punishments than they had received before. In 1941, starvation broke out in the Gulag camps, and as many as one-quarter of inmates died that year alone. The bodies were simply dumped, or the

# HEIN

## ◆ Life in the Kolyma Gulag

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**Death was ever-present in Kolyma.** Here, prisoners dispose of starved corpses through a hole in the ice while a guard with a dog looks on.

“goners” in the camp were assigned to bury them. The starvation victims did not weigh very much. Most were buried, either in unmarked graves, or their bodies thrown into work sites and covered to avoid the trouble of digging a grave.

Somehow, Hein managed to survive it all. In his years in Kolyma, he survived all five administrative heads of Dalstoy. He saw the camp population double and triple with various groups: Purge victims in the late 1930s, then Germans and other targeted ethnic groups in the early 1940s, and as the war went on, POWs from the war in the mid to late 1940s, which included Germans, Japanese, and new political prisoners. In 1948, Stalin declared that Soviet-born Germans were permanently exiled and forbidden from returning to their former homes.

Through all these events, the prisoners were cut off from the rest of the world. They slaved away in the furthest corner of the Soviet empire, their strength draining as they mined the hills of Kolyma or built roads in its permafrost. No one, except the guards, the other prisoners, and God, bore witness to their suffering. Those who sur-

vived kept their head down and did their work. Endless death, torment, cold, hunger, and slavery was their lot in life. They slogged day after day in the Gulag to advance Soviet goals as long as their luck or their strength endured.

Hein had served 17 years when Stalin died in 1953. There were mass amnesties, but only for the real criminals. Political prisoners were not eligible for release. Still, conditions improved in the camps. Then some political prisoners began to be set free, but not the hated Germans, who were still considered the worst enemies of socialism. In 1955, the Chancellor of Germany had visited Moscow on behalf of Germans in Russia. The following year, 1956, Hein and other Germans were at last released from their life sentences. They still could not return to their homelands, however, and Hein had to remain in exile in the North.

Three to five million people died in the Kolyma camps between 1931 and 1953, perhaps one-fifth of the 20 million people who died in the entire Gulag.



# A Life Sentence in the Kolyma Gulag

# HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



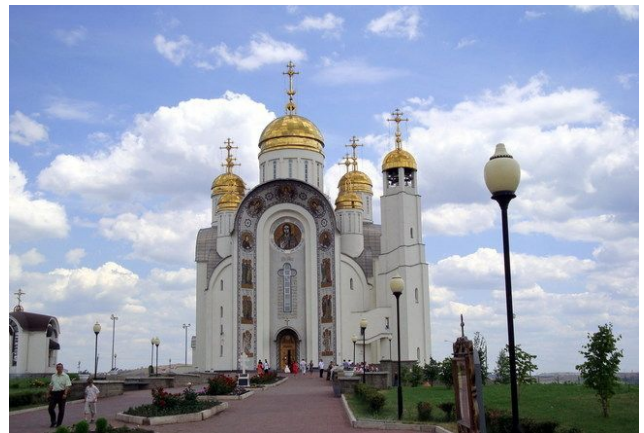
The city of Magadan has a population of about 100,000. Its industries are fishing, mining, making pasta and sausage, and distilling.



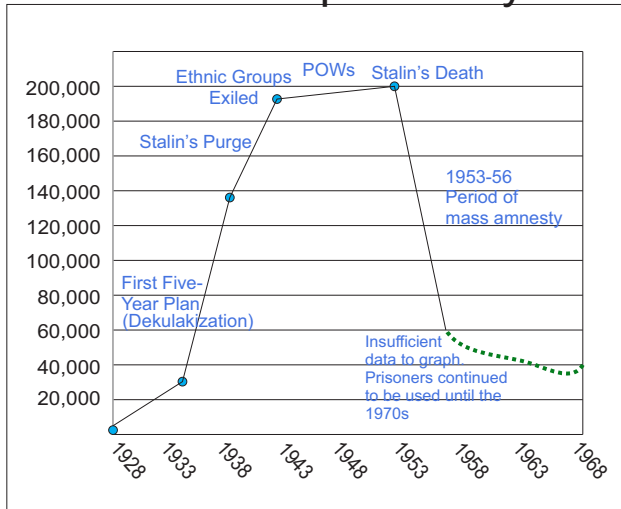
Temperatures still drop to -50 and -60 below 0, F.



Many former prisoners, too poor to move anywhere else and forbidden from returning home, remained in the region.



## Growth of Camps in Kolyma

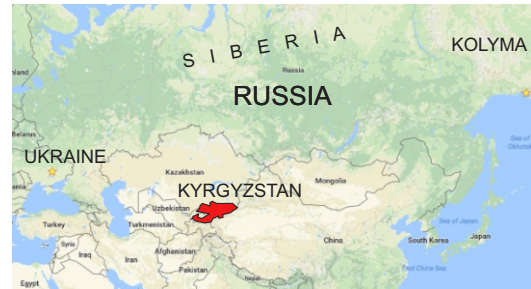


# HEIN ♦ A New Life in Exile

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



**After his release from the Gulag, Hein met and married Shura, who had been brave enough to offer him, a recently-released convict, a job. Here are Shura, Hein, and their eldest daughter, Anna, in 1957.**



**Hein and his family moved to Kyrgyzstan once he was permitted to leave Kolyma.**

lived there as well. German Mennonites had settled in the area beginning in the late 1800s, and a surge of Germans had come during Stalin's deportations beginning in the late 1920s. There were even some German-Mennonite towns, where people spoke Mennonite Low German. By 1979, 101,000 Germans lived in Kyrgyzstan, nearly the same number as had lived in Ukraine before World War II. It was still

difficult to live under an unjust and capricious system, and he was still part of a hated ethnic group, but with a family and work, Hein managed to establish a life there.

## *A New Life in Exile*

As a recently-released prisoner confined to Siberia, Hein was destitute. Rigid controls on where Germans could live, travel, and correspond in the Soviet Union limited his options. He was hopeless at first, thinking that no one would hire him and that he would starve to death. However, a woman named Shura offered him a job. He worked for her, they fell in love, married and had two daughters, Anna and Tinka. Life became better for him.

In December, 1955, the travel and movement restrictions for Germans in the USSR were lifted. Hein was granted a passport and permission to move, although he was still forbidden from returning to Ukraine. He and his family settled in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan had a large Muslim population, but Germans



**Hein's family: Shura, daughters Tinka and Anna, and Heinrich.**



## A Brutal Murder ♦ HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

Hein found his brothers, Peter and Gerhard, and began to correspond with them. They had been sent to the Gulag as well, each for a different reason: Peter in 1941, with the wave of ethnic cleansing just before the German occupation; and Gerhard in 1945 as a captured German prisoner of war. They were all released close to the same time.

In October, 1959, Gerhard came to visit Hein and his family in Kyrgyzstan. It was the first time Hein had seen family in nearly a quarter century. He was able to see Peter and his family as well, who also had settled in Kyrgyzstan. The brothers exchanged stories and caught each other up on the events of the past 25 years. They had been scattered to the far reaches of the Soviet Union during that time apart, but each had endured hardships and heartbreaks that were the same no matter where one served in the Gulag.

### *A Brutal Murder*

Hein's difficulties were not all behind him. The Dyck family suffered a terrible tragedy in Kyrgyzstan.

Hein and Shura's daughter, Anna, became a bookkeeper in a factory. Corruption was rampant, and dishonest people sometimes altered the factory's books, stole goods, and sold the surplus on the black market. The practice could be lucrative.

Anna was approached by men who worked at the factory. They asked her to alter the books for them, in exchange for a cut of the profit. She refused. Some time later, she was walking home from work when these same men grabbed her and shoved her in their truck. They drove to a quiet place, pushed her in front of the truck, and ran over her repeatedly until she died.

“

Justice was hard to find  
in the Soviet Union.

”

The police did not seem terribly interested in investigating the murder. When Hein went to inquire about the investigation, the police suggested that Anna had been drunk. Hein insisted that they were wrong. He kept visiting the station and making inquiries until the police followed the evidence and tracked down Anna's killers. The men were convicted, but given rather light sentences; for brutally murdering an innocent woman, each of her killers spent a couple of years in prison. It was so typical: justice was hard to find in the Soviet Union.

Anna left behind a son named Andrew. Hein and Shura helped raise him. Later, Andrew lived with his Aunt Tinka (Anna's younger sister) in Germany.



**The Dyck Family:** daughters Anna and Katharina (Tinka), Shura & Hein.  
Anna was brutally murdered.

# HEIN ♦ Visits to the West

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



Hein visited Canada for the first time in 1980 when he was 66 years old.



Hein with sisters Anni and Neta in Clearbrook, B.C. His 1980 trip was the first time he had seen his mother and sisters since his arrest in 1936, 44 years earlier.

## *Visits to the West*

Hein heard from the rest of his family. His mother and sisters, Neta and Anni, had immigrated to Canada in 1949. They had been able to find addresses for Hein and his brothers through the Red Cross. His sister Tina had settled in Germany. They exchanged letters, and Hein expressed his desire to see them again after so many years.

In 1980, Hein's sister Anni helped him obtain a 30-day visa to travel to Canada. Hein traveled to Moscow to pick up his ticket, but it proved to be difficult to get the papers to exit the country. He went to the Moscow office each day for several days, and the employees always told him, "There is no ticket here for you." He grew worried, because his visa was rapidly expiring. Hein took a seat in the waiting room and spent some time observing how others were able to conduct their business in that office. The next day when he came to check on his paperwork, he slipped a bottle of vodka wrapped in newspaper to the ticketing agent and was promptly issued his traveling papers. Bribes were often necessary in that system.

Hein traveled to Abbotsford, British Columbia, and was grateful to be reunited with his mother and sisters again after 44 years. He was able to hear about the remarkably different paths each of their lives had taken after events had scattered them from their life together in Nieder-Chortitza, Ukraine. He was amazed at the material abundance of life in Canada, and how well his family lived there. In all, he made three trips to Canada: the first in 1980; the second in 1983, and the third in 1986.

On his first trip to Canada, Hein was rather quiet. He was circumspect when telling his Canadian family about his past. He didn't share much about his arrest, his long years in the Gulag, or the difficulties he experienced in Kyrgyzstan. He even mentioned that there could be hidden listening devices that they didn't know about. It was evident that he thought what he said in Canada might put him or his family in jeopardy. Of the three brothers, Hein was the most reticent; but then, he had



# HEIN ♦ Visits to the West

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



On a ferry in British Columbia with Ferngren girls.



Hein visiting niece Agnes Ferngren and her family in Oregon in 1986. Anne-Marie Nakhla (author of this book) is 2nd from right.



At the Oregon Coast with sister Neta and niece Katie on his trip to the U.S. "Here in the West, people are so free," Hein said.

served the longest sentence in the Gulag, and suffered greatly there. Having lived so many years under repressive rule, it was understandable that he would be cautious.

On a subsequent trip to Canada, Hein's sister Neta and her daughter, Katie, wanted to take him to visit family in the United States. He was reluctant to go, fearful that the border crossing would be difficult, and that a U.S. stamp would get him in trouble when he got back to Russia. They decided to go nonetheless. On the way to Oregon, they stopped in Olympia, Washington, at the Washington state capitol. When Katie suggested posing for a picture by a statue of a soldier, Hein became agitated when he spotted an official. As they entered the capitol building, Hein noticed a guard and said quietly, "He has a gun." Katie and Neta assured him there would be no trouble. When they got back into the car, Hein voiced his amazement. "Here in the West, people are so free," he mused. "They can cross international borders, stand by statues of fallen soldiers, and even walk into the capitol building without anybody challenging them."

On Hein's last trip to Canada, his nephew Roy Gunkel gave him a copy of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Hein spent hours pouring over the book while in Canada, and read aloud excerpts to his sister Neta, with whom he was staying. He read her a passage where Solzhenitsyn describes an episode in which 1500 men were sent to a distant site to work, and only 300 men returned alive. Hein said, "This is true. I was one of the few who came back."

Hein was amazed by the accuracy and boldness of Solzhenitsyn's account of the Gulag, in which he had suffered so many long years. Even more astounding was that this information was coming out of a communist country, where the walls of secrecy were high. "When we went through this atrocity, we men talked about it among ourselves. We said, 'The world will never know what we are going through. Our stories will die with us, and the world will never know.' But this man is telling the truth, and he is telling the world."



# Visits to the West ♦ HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)



Hein with his mother, Anganetha Penner Dyck, age 91.  
She passed away two years later.



Hein doing a project at Neta's house  
while visiting in Canada.



Hein, with sisters Neta and Tina at Westminster Abbey in  
Mission, BC, Canada, overlooking the Fraser River Valley.



Visiting with his mother.



Hein and Tina in Vancouver, BC.



# Leaving the Soviet Union ♦ HEIN

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

## *Leaving the Soviet Union*

Life had been grim for the Germans in Russia for a century. Under communism, they had been one of the most hated ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. They had been targeted, displaced, arrested, enslaved, and exiled. It had been no land of opportunity for them.

Hein had seen the beginning and the end of Soviet communism. He had been nearly four years old when the Bolshevik Revolution introduced communism to the Soviet Union in October, 1917, and he was 78 years old when the Soviet Union dissolved in December, 1991. Fifty-five of those years he had been exiled from his home in Ukraine; twenty years he had been a prisoner, doing back-breaking labor in the far north for a false charge of treason; two years he had served in the Russian army; and several months he had lived as a fugitive for the crime of stealing potatoes during a famine. He bore many scars from the oppressive regime.

After Kyrgyzstan gained independence in 1991, as many as 85% of the 101,000 ethnic Germans in the country sought to emigrate to Germany. A German law granted German citizenship to anyone with proof of their German ancestry, and provided a welcome homeland for the Germans like Hein and his family living in Kyrgyzstan. Many left. By Kyrgyzstan's 1999 census, only 21,000 Germans remained in the country, and by 2009, there were 10,000.

Tina, Hein's sister, sponsored him and his family to emigrate to Germany in the mid-1990s. Hein was the last of his family to leave the Soviet Union. In 1998, Hein's sisters Neta and Anni and Anni's husband Karl visited Germany, and the six Dyck siblings had a reunion. They were able to be together again.

Hein's wife Shura found adjusting to German life difficult. She wanted to return to Kyrgyzstan, she said just to visit, but once they got there, she wanted to stay. Within a year, she died there, and Hein returned to Germany where his daughter Tinka and her family lived. He lived out his last few years in Germany, and died on April 30, 2001. He was 87.



**Hein and his family in August, 1988, in front of their home in Kyrgyzstan. L to R: wife Shura, daughter Tinka, Hein, grandson Andrew, and grandchild.**



**Shura and Hein immigrated to Germany in the mid-1990s, but Shura found it difficult to become accustomed to a new culture. They returned to Kyrgyzstan until her death.**



**Shura & Hein's daughter, Tinka, and her family.**

# HEIN

## ◆ Telling the Truth, and Telling the World

Heinrich Dyck (1913-2001)

“

When we went through this atrocity,  
we men talked about it among ourselves.  
We said, 'The world will never know  
what we are going through.  
Our stories will die with us,  
and the world will never know.'  
But this man is telling the truth,  
and he is telling the world.”

Hein Dyck, in Canada in 1986, upon reading *The Gulag Archipelago*

”

Hein never spoke freely about his life in the Gulag and in Kyrgyzstan. Having lived for so long under an oppressive and capricious regime, he was cautious in what he shared, but he found his own experience in the work.



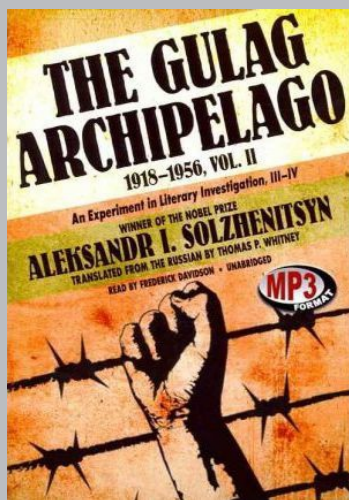
Hein singing on one of his trips to Canada.

## THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* is one of the most significant works written on the Soviet prison camp system. Its three volumes deal historically and philosophically with the cruelties imposed on millions of innocent political prisoners in the Gulag. It has been called “the voice of all those who suffered,” and has had a profound impact internationally.

Solzhenitsyn hid portions of his manuscript in friends' homes while writing it in secret in Moscow between 1958 and 1967. He never had the entire manuscript in front of him at

once. Friends smuggled it out of Russia, where it was first published in the Russian language in France in 1973, and in following months quickly translated into many other languages. The KGB forced Solzhenitsyn into permanent exile in 1974.



Based on Solzhenitsyn's own eight years of imprisonment in the Gulag, first-hand testimony of 256 fellow prisoners, and primary documentation, *The Gulag Archipelago* brings to light the horrors of the Gulag, and speaks for many who suffered and perished there. It describes the experience of zeks (inmates) as they were herded through their arrests, show trials, and transport to prison camps. Once there, it tells how they were frozen, starved, tortured, mistreated, and enslaved.

Solzhenitsyn broke new ground in tracing the camp system all the way back to Vladimir Lenin in 1918, rather than Stalin. He argued that the threat of imprisonment, exile, and slave labor was fundamental to communism from its inception.

The book was widely read in the West and circulated underground in the Soviet Union until 1989, when it was published there for the first time. It has sold over 30 million copies in 35 different languages. Royalties from the book were put into the Solzhenitsyn Aid Fund, which helped former prisoners during the 1970s and 1980s.

The word “Gulag” comes from an acronym from the Russian name for “Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps,” “Glavnoye Upravleniye ispravitelno-trudovyyh Lagerey.” “Archipelago” was Solzhenitsyn's metaphor for the vast system of camps spread like a chain of islands across the USSR, unified in their isolation and their horror.