

THE GREAT TREK

1943-1944

Anna Penner left Ukraine during the Great Trek and buried her mother, Anganetha Penner, along the way. Anna was Neta Loewen's aunt, and Anganetha Penner was Neta's grandmother. Anna and Neta shared a house for 35 years in Canada. Here is Anna's account of the Great Trek.



Anna Penner (L) left Nieder-Chortitz with her mother, Anganetha Bergen Penner (R), who died along the trek at a Russian village. The last thing she told Anna was "I am praying for you all, that God will protect you." They buried her in a Russian cemetery.

In September 1943, when the German army retreated, the German people left Russia as well. Most people went by horse and buggy. The sick, and women with small children, went by train. We went

by train because my mother was sick. In my family, there were six of us who left Russia at the same time: my mother, me, my sister Lena, my nieces Anni and Tina, and Tina's 2-year-old son Victor. The German people were very happy to leave Russia.

We stopped for ten days at a Russian village named Verhevika, where my mother died. She had heart disease and had been failing for some time. We had made a bed on top of some crates for her and I sat by her bed much of the time. The last night I had been dozing in my chair, and she said to me, "You are so tired, why don't you lay down and get some rest? I want to sleep this night also."

I said, "Mother, I will lay down on the floor here by you, and if you need anything, wake me." After a little while, I heard her talking. I couldn't understand what she was saying, so I asked, "Mother, do you need anything?"

"No, child," she said, "I do not need anything. I am praying for you all, that God will protect you."

Then she was quiet. She stopped talking and moaning. I thought, "She is asleep, now I will catch a little sleep also." But before I lay down, I took one look at her to make sure, and realized that she was gone. Those were her last words to me, that she was praying for the protection of her family.

We were able to bury her in that Russian village. Most of our town was still together, and she had a Christian burial. Before we left home, she said, "I may die on this trip. When I die, if possible, I would like to be buried, even if it is in a Russian cemetery, as long as you don't have to leave me somewhere by the side of the road." When we left the village, we drove past the cemetery, and I was able to see her grave, which was marked with a cross. Some Russian people promised us that when it would be possible, they

would move her to a cemetery in a German town that was not far from there. I don't know that was done. She was 73 years old when she died.

From there we came to Prescuro, in Poland, then to Lizmannstadt. There the Russians had surrounded us and it looked like we would be taken captive. But the German soldiers were able to break through the Russian line and we were able to escape. The German soldiers took care of us and were concerned that we get out.

We continued to Apostel where there was a train accident. Another train collided with ours and three people were killed in our wagon alone. The people were transported in cattle cars, which were heated by pot-belly stoves. They were hot, and when the train hit, the stove fell on Lisa Penner's mother and she burned to death. That was terrible. In one car, three children of the same family were killed. I was holding Victor on my lap, and he hung so limp in my arms, I asked him, "Victor, are you alive?" He was alive. After the accident we were loaded into another train.

From Russia we came to Warthegau, from there we came to Lampertswalde, to Dresden, and from there we were sent to Yugoslavia.