Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The Loewen family on June 8, 1941, just before war broke out with Germany. They have displayed their valuables: a bicycle, a motorcycle, and a radio on the table. They had three children at the time: Fred, Helen, and Agnes.

Family Life in Russia

We had our second baby, Agnes, in April, 1938. We moved to a two-bedroom apartment in another house. Tante Lentje and my cousins, Neta and Lena, lived next door. I spent many afternoons with them. Tante Lentje taught me to sew, and we visited as we sewed together. Isaac bought me a spinning wheel and a sheep, and his mother showed me how to spin the wool into yarn.

Agnes had an accident when she was three. She was so small, and she was trying to see what was on the table. She pulled the table cloth, and a hot soup tureen spilled all over her. She had hot potatoes under her arms, and as I pulled off her dress, large patches of skin came off too. For three days, we weren't sure if she would live. But she recovered, and has no scars from her burns.

Our third child was born in September, 1940. We named him Isaac, after his father. But because the war broke out and the Germans came into Ukraine, we had to change his name shortly after. Isaac was a Jewish name, and the Germans didn't like that. So he became Fritz, and now we call him Fred.

War With Germany: World War II (1940)

In 1940, people began talking about war. Then Hitler made a peace treaty with Russia, and they said there *wouldn't* be war. Everybody was glad. But then, Germany surprised Russia with an attack, and the war started suddenly.

It was in the summer of 1941. Fred, who was 8 months old, got very sick. Many babies had gotten dysentery, with diarrhea and vomiting, and many babies died. My husband took us to a Russian hospital in Zaporozhia, and I stayed with Fred there. I had to wear a blue gown, and stay in a room at night with fifteen other Russian ladies. Since I did-

NETA ◆ War With Germany: World War II (1940)

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

n't speak Russian, I couldn't speak with the ladies in the sleeping quarters. When they found out I was German, they weren't very friendly to me. They were all talking excitedly, and I kept hearing the words, "Germans, Germans." I *did* know what that word meant.

For the first two days, the nurses didn't tell me anything about Fred. I thought that maybe he had died, and they took him away and never told me anything. One night, I got up and started looking for him. We were not allowed to go upstairs where the sick babies were, but I pushed the nurses aside and went from bed to bed, looking for him. Finally, one nurse grabbed my hand and took me into Fred's room. He was all by himself in a small room. Maybe it was the room where they die. He was just skin and bones, so sick that he couldn't even cry aloud. And then I could speak Russian: I started crying. The nurse felt sorry for me, and said she would give him a little water each hour, and make his mouth a little wet. After that they came and told me about him regularly.

I was at that hospital for a week. That was in June, 1941, right when war broke out with Germany. The fourth day I was there, a nurse told all the ladies in our room that they must report for work...but I was the only one who went. All day, a nurse and I cut strips from paper, and put them on the outside across the windows. I asked this nurse, "Why are they doing this?" She said, "This is for when the bombs fall, so the windows won't break." In the evening, the head nurse brought me back to the sleeping quarters. She told the Russian ladies that tomorrow they should all come and work too. Nobody said anything, and before the nurse walked out, she turned around and said, "Only *one* person came and worked, and she was a *German*!" I thought it was nice she said that.

Neta was in the hospital with her sick baby when Germany invaded Russia in June, 1941. Right away, she noticed that Russians regarded her with suspicion because of her ethnicity.

Finally, in the evening my husband came, and he told me that war had broken out with Germany. "The Germans started the war. They declared war on Russia, and it's very bad for us," he said. Then he said, "I will have to go with the combines across the river." The Russians were taking all the machinery east, so that when the enemy came, they wouldn't get it. My mother-in-law was watching Agnes and Helen, and I told my husband, "I want to come home if you go away." He said, "I'll take you home tomorrow." So he came back the next day and took me home on the motorcycle.

Neta helped a nurse bomb-proof the windows of the Russian hospital in Zaporozhia.

Fred came home, too. I had a seat in the back, and I sat with him for the 30-kilometer drive. It was very hot. On our way back, Isaac stopped a few times so I could ask people for a little bottle with water in it to give to my baby. But since we were Germans, the Russians didn't like us, and nobody was willing to give me any water for my baby. They said, "He will die anyways. Get out of here as soon as possible!" I was very glad to get home. When I unwrapped Fred and put him in the cradle, he opened his big eyes and turned his little head, and looked as if he was happy to be home.

Leaving Nothing for the Invaders

The day after we returned from the hospital, Isaac left to go with the tractors and combines across the river. The Russians were emptying the *kolkhoz* barns and taking everything they could across the river…all the cows, sheep, horses, farm machinery, grain, and food, so when the Germans came, they wouldn't find anything to help them. It took weeks. Our house was close to the main roadway. All day, the highway was clogged with soldiers traveling west. And all night long, I could hear the cattle bellowing as they moved east on the highway. Sometimes these cows needed milking, and the herders ran around asking ladies to come and milk them. The cows were hurting, and their udders were full. But how much can you milk? One, two cows? I went just to help the cows, but I didn't need the milk, since we had our own.

Isaac came back on the third night. The Russian soldiers didn't want to let him go west, but he had said, "My family is waiting on the other side of the river, and I have to get across the bridge. I promised that I would come back and get them." He had to beg. "I left my wife, alone, with three small children, one of them a little baby…I promised that I would come back and get them." They finally told him, "Then go, but come back right away!" "OK," he said. So he came home and hid until the Germans were there.

One day, the Russians told us that the next day they would take our cows. Our sheep were already gone, but we needed our cows to give milk to our children. All the women in the village were indignant, and said, "They are not taking our cows away!"

The Dnieper River provided a natural wartime barrier. The Russians evacuated as many resources as they could east over the river and then blew up the bridges to slow down the Germans in their eastward advance. The German-Mennonites in Chortitza (red circle) were supposed to cross the river, and many were sent to Siberia , but some, like the Loewens, fled west until they encountered the German army.

As part of their scorched earth policy, the Soviets drove thousands of cattle across the Dnieper River. They evacuated anything the attacking Germans might find useful. Neta and other women were asked to help milk the cows, whose udders were full and they were in pain.

NETA ◆ Escaping Siberia: Refusing to Go East

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The Mennonite women in Neuendorf refused to give up their cows to the Russians.

The Mennonite people were all instructed to leave their homes and cross the river too. The Soviet plan was to send them all to Siberia.

Isaac and his friend, Mr. Klassen, went for their horses and wagon. The Klassens had seven children, and the Loewens had three.

The cows were already driven into a big pen, ready to be transported out of the area, when all the ladies of the village came to take our cows back. Each lady had a rope and a stick. These men, who were all on horses, were swearing at us and hitting us with their whips...but they were just pretending. I believe that they didn't really want to take our cows, and they were glad that we were so brave! We took our cows and went home. I thought it was so great! We were all one!

In Nieder-Chortitza, the women had done that too, refused to give up their cows. But there, one lady had started it. They took her to Siberia, and she never came back. Maybe they shot her or something. But in our village, there was no leader. We were all one. We did it together. (We kept our cows hidden in the barn for the rest of the evacuation).

It took a couple of weeks to move everything across the river. The Russians had planned to send all of us (German-Russians) over the river too, to Siberia. Because we were Germans, they didn't trust us anymore. But they didn't have time to carry out that plan.

Escaping Siberia: Refusing to Go East

One night the Russians told us, "Get ready. Tomorrow you go across the river." My husband and his friend Mr. Klassen, who was a tractorist too, went for the horses and wagon. The Klassens had seven children, and we had three. We packed some food and put all the children in the wagon, tied our cows on the wagon, and went out in the night. It looked like we were ready to go across the river in the morning, but we went the other way, west instead of east. We passed a big corn field, and it was full of German people speaking *Platts-Deutsch*. It made us feel better. We thought we were the only ones fleeing the Russians!

We had to travel on the big road, the highway, and we met many Russian soldiers. Twice we were stopped by the Russians. They said, "*Stoi*! Stop! Where are you going, and what do you have on your wagon?" We would say, "Children!" They

came to the wagon and pulled off the blanket. We had told the children, "If they do that, you all scream!", so all ten of the children screamed. The Russian soldiers swore and quickly covered up the children again. But then they said, "You're going the wrong way! You have to go east! Why are you going west?" We said, "We are not from here; we're lost." They told us, "You have to turn around." So twice we did that. We'd turn the wagon around as *slowly* as we could, and travel east so *slowly* that the soldiers got impatient and didn't want to wait for us, so they would leave us. The third time that happened, though, the Russian soldiers wanted to help us and take us along with them. Mr. Klassen and my husband told them that a wheel was broken on the wagon. They started repairing our "broken" wheel, but did it so slowly that the soldiers couldn't wait for us, so they left us. But we felt that had been too close. So we left the highway because it was too dangerous.

We went off the road into the valley and traveled across fields all night. We hid all day in cornfields, and then by night we went west again. Once we hid in a valley where there wasn't any water, so the men had to go looking for some. Isaac and his friend snuck into an almost-deserted village to refill our water jugs, and then returned.

The Loewen family knew that the front was close. The Russian evacuation efforts were disorganized, and in their haste to get the Germans across the river, some were left behind. The Loewen and Klassen families slipped through the fray. Other Germans did too, hiding in corn fields.

When it got too dangerous for the Loewen's and Klassens to stay on the road, they found a valley where they could hide all day, then travel west by night.

They hadn't wanted to attract any attention, so they hadn't asked many questions.

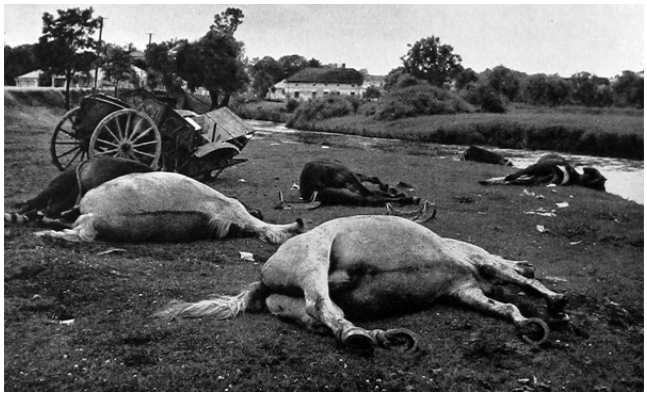
It was a beautiful day in that valley. It was August, and we had our cows. We milked the cows, and we had some food. It was almost like a picnic! Fred was still very weak and sick, but other than that it was wonderful.

All the next night we traveled on wagons between fields of corn and grain, and the next morning, we arrived at a wheat field along a highway. We could see army trucks and tanks on the highway. The men went to investigate. When our husbands came back they said, "We only saw Germans on the highway. All the Russians are gone, and the Germans are here!"

Then they walked into a village and talked with German soldiers. They even brought some soldiers back with them. The soldiers were amazed that they would find Germans living so deep into Russia. Our men spoke good German and good Russian, too. The soldiers said, "We need men like these to translate." They wanted to take them along to work for the German army. "No!" Mrs. Klassen and I said. "Do you see all our children? We need our men!" "The war will soon be over, and then you can have them back!" they said. But we told them no: we were all going home.

NETA ◆ Living Under German Occupation

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)



The Soviets had emptied their collective barns, and tried to drive all the the livestock across the Dnieper, but the hurried journey had been too much for some animals. When the Loewens returned to Neuendorf, they passed many dead horses and cattle.

The Germans told us to delay a day because they didn't know how far ahead the front was, and they didn't want us to be where the fighting was. We waited one more day and then we went home. All along the road back to Neuendorf, we found lots of dead cattle. The Russians had been driving them so far and so hard that many had died. The grain was all trampled down in the fields too. Neuendorf was filled with German jeeps and soldiers, and wagons of people returning from hiding. Our yard was full of German army trucks: they had a Red Cross jeep and three hearses there.

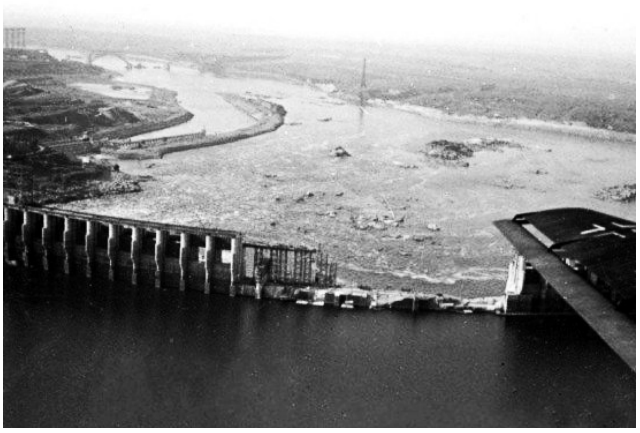
Living Under German Occupation

We weren't afraid of the German army. We could speak with them. The soldiers stayed with us in our houses. They were kind men. They told stories to our children, and told us that the war would soon be over. But we hadn't been afraid of the Russian soldiers, either, because they hadn't harmed us. We didn't know the terrible things the Nazis were doing to the Jewish people. We had no idea of that until after the war.

One day, there was an air raid. There was a loud explosion in the yard, and the whole house shook. I grabbed the small children and shouted for Helen to follow me to the cellar. She must not have heard, for she was upstairs, not knowing where we were. There were German soldiers in our kitchen, and one grabbed her and held her to the floor to keep safe. After the air raid, we came upstairs. A bomb had exploded in the neighbor's yard, and a woman and a small boy had been killed. Medics brought a wounded soldier to our house. He was bleeding all over, and crying out for help. We helped clean and bandage him.

The next week we went to Nieder-Chortitza to see my family. The Russians had blown up the dam, and half of their village had flooded, but my family was safe. Instead of going east across the Dnieper, my family and others hid in Grandma's cellar for several days, about 30 people in all. They closed the shutters and padlocked the door, so the Soviets wouldn't find them. Then, one day (August 18, 1941), they heard jeeps and talking outside, and saw German trucks covered in camouflage. The went and talked with the German soldiers, who also were amazed to find Germans in Russia. The German soldiers told them to wait a bit longer before coming out of hiding, since there were still some Russian soldiers around. So they were all safe except my brother Peter, who had gone east with the tractor brigade and had not returned. I found out later that he had been sent to Siberia, and I wouldn't see him again for nearly forty years.

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)



The Soviets blew up their own dam over the Dnieper River in an attempt to stall the Germans on the west banks of the river. They had warned no one, and the resulting tsunami cost as many as 100,000 human lives, mostly Soviet citizens, and the death of many livestock and vast loss of property. It gained the Russians a few weeks.

Under German occupation, we thought that we would finally have freedom. The church was reopened. We didn't have Bibles or song books, because the communists had destroyed them all, but we worshiped together again, and sometimes German soldiers came, too. In the fall, the Germans organized the schools, and used our own Mennonite teachers. My sisters Tina and Anni taught in Nieder-Chortitza, and my brother Gerhard in Odessa.

The German army still had rules for us, though. We could keep our cow, but we had to deliver a certain amount of milk to the Germans to feed the army. There was a milk plan and an egg plan and a meat plan. First, we had to do this under the Russians, and now, we had to do the same for the Germans. But that was okay...we were used to it, and the Germans treated us much better than the Russians had.

There were many air strikes during those first few weeks. The Russians were bombing the Germans on our side of the river. There were wrecked jeeps and trucks everywhere. Isaac collected parts from wrecked vehicles, and in a month, he had made a car. It looked strange, but it worked. But the Germans said that they needed it for the war, and took it away. They gave him a note that said that he could have it back after the war. The Russians had already taken away his motorcycle, our radio and bicycle, and now his car, too. It was one more thing lost.

After the Russians had taken all the machinery across the river, there was no work for Isaac to do. The Germans started begging that he come and work for them for pay, since he spoke German, Ukrainian, and Russian. At first, he said no, but he was at home, bored, with no work. So, he became a civilian translator and chauffeur for the German

The German army stayed on the west banks of the Dnieper River for several weeks until bridges were repaired and they were ready for the eastward advance into the Soviet Union.

Mennonite families had to billet German soldiers in their homes, and their supplies were requisitioned for army needs. They were well-acquainted with requisitioning.

NETA ◆ Drafted into Hitler's Army

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Isaac began working for the German army as a civilian translator and chauffeur, along with four other Mennonite men from Neuendorf. And then one day he came home in uniform and said that he had been drafted, much to his dismay.
Pictured: Isaac and company training.

army. There were five men from our village who did this, all from Isaac's tractor brigade.

At first, he came home on weekends. But when the Army crossed the Dnieper River, he couldn't come home quite so often. And then, in 1942, Isaac was drafted into the German army.

Drafted into Hitler's Army

Isaac came home wearing a German uniform. All five Mennonite men who had started working as civilians for the army wore uniforms. They had all been drafted into the army. We all felt bad, Isaac too. It hadn't been their choice. The Germans didn't care that the Mennonites were pacifists.

Isaac said that we five women should go to Chortitza where the officers were, and tell them that we had small children and needed our men back. So, we did. But the officers just laughed at us and said, "Oh, this war will soon be over. We need your men to help us win. When the war is over, they'll come home heroes." The officers said that they would support us, but they never did. They sent us home, and they took more Mennonites. In the end, the Germans conscripted everybody, even young boys and old men. They all had to work for the army, digging shelters.

The Germans had thought that it would be a quick war. They had quickly conquered Ukraine. But Russia is so big, with so many people. It was a cold winter, and the Germans didn't have clothing that was warm enough for a Russian winter. So the war stretched out longer and longer.

Farewell to My Soldier

Isaac came home only once on furlough after that, in November of 1942. He was home for just two days. He had been very far, almost to Stalingrad. When it was time for him to go back to the front, I wanted to go along with him to the train station. It was early in the morning, and there was

Isaac Loewen in uniform, playing with his gun, ironic because he was a Mennonite and a pacifist.

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Isaac Loewen, 28 years old

very deep, fresh snow. I was having a hard time, since I was seven months pregnant. Finally, Isaac said that I should go back to the children. "You'll get your feet wet, and that won't help anything," he said. So, we said goodbye.

That's the last time I ever saw him. As I walked to the road, a voice said to me, "You'll never see him again." I wanted to run after him, but there was such deep snow and I couldn't run since Katie wasn't born yet. So, I did go back. That *was* the last time I ever saw him, which is why I think that voice was God. I can still picture him walking through that deep snow with his suitcase.

Katie was born two months later, in January, 1943. I wrote Isaac about her, but he never got to see her.

Isaac was home for two days in November, 1942. He had been almost to Stalingrad. Neta tried to accompany him to the train station in the early morning, but there was deep, fresh snow and she was seven months pregnant. "That's the last time I ever saw him," Neta said, 60 years later. "I can still picture him walking through that deep snow with his suitcase."

Neta received letters from Isaac from the front through the end of 1943.

NETA ◆ Preparing for Evacuation

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The Nazi mass evacuation of ethnic Germans from the village of Glückstal in Ukraine, March 18, 1944. Neuendorf would have looked similar during its evacuation in 1943. *Photo: Ken Flemmer*

Neta and her mother-in-law slaughtered their pigs and made sausage for their journey their last day at home in Neuendorf.

Preparing for Evacuation

In 1943, the German army and refugees started to come from the east, from the Caucuses and other parts. They told us terrible things about the war. The Russians came back too, flying low planes and bombing our villages. We were always afraid when the bombs fell. We'd be digging in the garden, and then have to run and hide when the bombs came, but we could never get very far. They never hit any soldiers, just civilians.

In October, 1943, we had to leave Russia. The Germans had told us they would take us ahead of the army, so we had to be ready to evacuate. My mother-in-law and I managed to butcher our pigs. She butchered hers first. She asked the German soldiers to shoot the pig and then we skinned it. The two of us worked hard all day. The next day we did my pig. We made lots of sausage, and we pickled it in barrels with salt, and baked a lot so that we would have something to eat on our trip.

And then the day came…October 18, 1943. The Germans loaded us and our baggage onto big trucks and brought us to the train station. While we were sitting on the trucks waiting to leave the village, two Russian women came and emptied my house. They took all my pots and pans and piled them into the cradle where my babies had slept, and carried everything out. It hurt me to watch them. I thought, "Oh, why didn't they *wait* a bit, 'til we were gone?" But it didn't really matter; I couldn't have taken anything along anyway. The chickens were running around in the yard, and we had let the cow loose and chased it out of the barn. I suppose the German soldiers must have butchered it.

Neta watched while Russian women plundered her house, loading her pots and pans into the cradle Isaac had made and carrying them away.

Fleeing Russia

Then the Germans brought us to the Kanstroika train station, and we lay there outside for two days and two nights, waiting for a train. There was a very cold wind. The whole village was there, hundreds of Mennonite people waiting in that station. We were so afraid the Russians would come and bomb us, but the German had lots of airplanes in the air, protecting us. We saw some air battles very near us: it was terrible to watch. Finally, on the third day, a train came and the Germans loaded us in the train. The train stood still a long, long time, for several hours. When it finally started moving, I screamed, "It's going! It really is!" I could start to believe that we might get away. We were so anxious to get out of Russia, since we knew when the Russians returned, they would send us all to Siberia because we had been friendly to the Germans.

We were on the train for a week, going from Kanstroika to German-occupied Poland. We ate whatever we had taken along, but whenever the train stopped, we had to run out and get water. We all got sick from the drinking water. The children all got diarrhea. Katie was eight months old. Can you imagine? I used newspaper when I didn't have diapers anymore.

When we got to Litzmannstadt, Poland (now it is called Lodz), they took us off the train and brought us to a city bath with lots of showers. They took the women in one room and all the men in another room. Fred got to stay with me, since he was little. They took off our clothes and disinfected them. We didn't have lice, but they treated us for it anyways, since some people did. And we washed our hair. That was a relief! And after that, they brought our clothes back, but everything was all mixed up and we had to sort, naked, through piles of clothes to find our own. After we found our clothes and got dressed, the Germans took us to another place where they gave us a hot meal.

Then we had to go back to the station, and they took us farther, to Kulm (Chełm, 16 miles / 25 km

The Loewens and hundreds of other Germans waited two days and two nights in a train station for a train to leave Ukraine. Hundreds of people waited, watching nearby air battles, and fearing that the Russians would bomb them.

The travelers got dysentery from drinking unclean water. Neta had only three diapers, and when those were used, she resorted to newspaper to diaper Katie, her baby. *Pictured: Polish newspapers from October, 1943, featured Stalin.*

Delousing, naked showers, disinfecting of clothes were all humiliating parts of the refugee experience.

NETA ◆ Devastation

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The Loewens in a refugee camp in Kulm, Poland. Neta (seated, holding Katie) is with her children, Agnes (left), Fred, and Helen (right), her mother-in-law, Helena, and Isaac's brother, Peter Loewen, with his wife and child (back row). Peter fought for the Germans and was shot upon returning to Russia in 1945.

from the border of Ukraine) on the Weichsel (Vistula River). There was a refugee camp there, where we stayed in barracks. They told us the barracks were clean, but they were actually infested with bed bugs. They swarmed at night. Oh, there were so many bed bugs, it was *terrible*! We were there from the end of October until June, 1944.

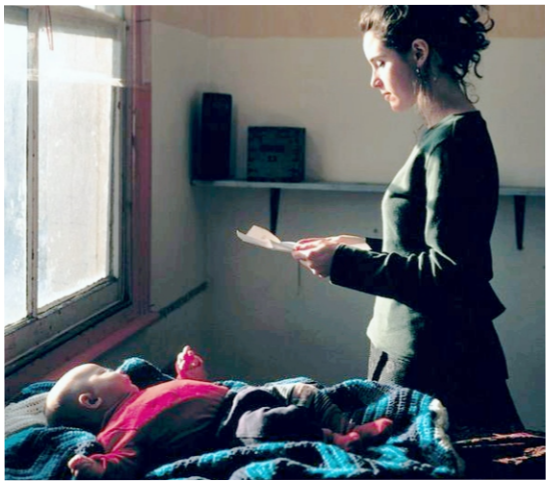
The refugees had to go help in the kitchen. But since I had four children, and Katie was small, I didn't need to. At the camp, they gave us clothes. At first I roomed with my mother-in-law. Then she and Helen were sent to a farm to work, and another lady came to room with me, Mrs. Coup, who had three children too. We got enough food there.

Devastation

I heard from my husband in Kulm. He wrote to us in November (1943). He said that he might be able to visit us for Christmas. He told me not to lose hope.

Just a few days later, I had a dream. I dreamt that a plane flew overhead and dropped a letter that fell slowly down from the sky, and came through the window. It landed on my heart, over my chest, and it was very heavy, like a brick.

The very next day, a German officer who had served in the army with my husband came to the camp in Kelm. He told me that Isaac was missing in action. My husband's disappearance had happened in Fastov. The Russians had made a big attack with the Panzers (tanks). The German soldiers were lying in bunkers, and the Russians came at them fast in the night and just plowed



A German Army officer came to tell Neta that Isaac was M.I.A., most likely captured or killed. Neta, now a homeless refugee, would have to raise their four children alone. They had been married 8 years, and Isaac had been away fighting the last two years. He had not yet met their youngest daughter, Katie, still a baby.

through just plowed through the bunkers. Many men were missing. They didn't know whether they had been killed, captured, or had fled. Isaac had been seen in a bunker just before an explosion happened there. I hoped he might still be alive. I got an official letter some time later.

It was just before Christmas that I got that message. I was so very sad I could hardly manage. Little Fred tried to comfort me. He said, "When I'm big, I'll build you a house, and then I'll be Papa." My friend, Anna Harder from Neuendorf, was in that same refugee camp. Her husband was dying of TB, and mine was missing. We cried together.

Isaac disappeared in November, 1943. He had last been seen in a bunker just before a surprise night attack by Russian panzers (armored vehicles and tanks), which plowed over the men. The offensive had been so swift that the Germans had fled, unable to return to identify bodies or reclaim the wounded.

Isaac had been stationed in Fastov, Ukraine. Fastov was an important military target, located at the conjunction of rail lines. The attack here was part of the larger campaign, the **Second Battle of Kiev** (Nov-Dec, 1943), in which 200,000 Soviet troops fought 70,000 German troops to regain Kiev. German causalities were 17,000, and Russian losses were 118,000.

NETA ◆ A Home in Poland

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

A Home in Poland

In June, 1944, the front was too close to Kulm. We had to leave the refugee camp where we were all together with Mennonite people from our village. The German Army loaded us in trains again and took us to Wartegau (Poland). Farmers then came with hay wagons, and brought us to Dieterwald.

When we left Russia, the Germans promised to give us homes and fields for those we had left behind. Now they did that in Wartegau by driving Poles out of their houses and giving them to us German people. It wasn't right.

They told me I was to live in a house. It was a three-room shack with a dirt floor. There were stinging nettles all around it that were taller than me, and broken windows. An old man sat in the back room. I couldn't talk to him because he was Polish. But I didn't like having to take over his house. We spent most of the next three days outdoors. It was still *his* house, not mine.

One day I met the *bürgermeister* (mayor), and he asked me about my husband. I told him Isaac was in the German army. "We will get you a better house, then," he said. The very next day, he sent a hay wagon to take us to an estate. There was a little house on that estate they were giving me, but they threw an elderly Polish couple out of their house so I could have it. I watched as the Polish owners carried their belongings into the barn. I felt horrible! I didn't want *their* home! "You can visit me at your house," I told the woman.

Neta's second Polish home was on an estate. She tried to earn her keep by doing farm chores with the hired help, and made friends with the Poles who had lost their home to her.

That house was on an estate where the Kerns were living. They were Germans but not Mennonite. The other Mennonite people lived scattered throughout the countryside. Only eight families from Neuendorf lived in Dieterwald. My friend Anna Harder, and her family lived nearby, and also Sarah Harder and her children.

I worked for the Kerns while I lived there. I didn't have to, but I wanted to be helpful so I worked with their hired workers. I picked potatoes and did chores on the estate. I told the Polish woman who had to live in the barn that I was sorry I was in her house. She said, "It's okay. You won't be here long." We became good friends. Helen and Agnes went to school in Dieterwald.

German policy in Poland was to oust the Polish people from their homes and give them to ethnic Germans. Neta felt badly about this. First, she was given a 3-room shack with broken windows, and later a nicer house once the mayor discovered that her husband was in the army.

Plagued by Lice

In Warthegau, we got lice. Agnes and Helen brought lice home in their hair. I didn't know what to do, and it was terrible! You could take your clothes off and look for lice, but you couldn't get them out of your hair. I had long hair, and I didn't want to cut it. The lice would have still been there anyway, even if I did cut it. I thought, "Oh, what shall I *do*?"

One night I couldn't sleep, because my head was so itchy. The thought came into my head that I should pray about it, but I was ashamed to pray about such a small thing. I thought, "There is a terrible war going on, and many soldiers are crying out to God as they lie dying on their battlefields. God can't be taking care of these little things!"

Early in the morning, there was a knock on my door. It was my neighbor lady. She said, "My husband came home late last night from the front, and he brought me two combs. The thought came to me in the night that I should bring you one of the combs. Again and again, I was bothered by that thought, so much that I couldn't go to sleep. I've brought you the comb so that I could finally have peace!" I said, "That's an answer to prayer!" And

A neighbor in Poland brought Neta a comb, giving Neta hope that even in wartime, God still heard her prayers.

Lice was a common refugee affliction.

we both laughed. I was able to clean my head from the lice.

When we were traveling in the refugee trek, everybody borrowed that comb. I loaned it to Mrs. Kern and to Herta, and to another family, the Dyckmans, whose two girls and mother all had lice. I kept it carefully pinned inside my coat pocket, so that it wouldn't fall out.

But then it disappeared. One time I looked for it in my pocket, and it wasn't there, and I never found it again. I believe that someone stole it. But by that time, we were almost to Austria, and I don't think we got lice again.

Fleeing the Front

We were in Wartegau, Poland, from June, 1944 'til the 18th of January, 1945. Then the Russians came back, and the front was right there, so we had to flee again. There were no trains to take us this time. The people I had worked for in Dieterwald, the Kerns, had a wagon, and they took me and my children with them. They had three families working for them at the time, but they took us along because I had helped them the most. We had only a half-hour to pack. I grabbed Isaac's big fur coat I had brought from home. I covered the children with that fur coat, and it kept them alive and warm during those two and a half months when we traveled in an open wagon. It was *very* cold when we fled in that refugee trek that winter.

NETA ◆ Fleeing the Front

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Neta dreamt that she saw a scene of multitudes fleeing at night in a snowstorm. It occurred a few nights later.

As the Russians drove the Germans back through Europe, Neta and other escapees were in peril of falling into Russian hands. All German Russians would have been considered traitors by the Russians, and treated harshly. Neta and other refugees fled in a refugee trek like this one, always trying to stay in German-occupied territory as the front came closer and closer.

A few nights earlier, I had dreamed that I was standing on a hill, looking at a frightening scene. There was a snow storm, and the whole world was dark and very, very cold. The sky in the east was red from fighting; that was where the front was. In my dream, there was a bright light that shone above me.

I had seen that exact picture in my dream a few nights before, and now I saw it real life. There were thousands of people on the road, walking, in wagons, pulling carts. All of us were trying to flee the Russians. It was very cold and frightening: so many people, all jammed together on the road, all desperately trying to get away. But when I looked up, there was no light in the sky; that had just been in my dream. A peace came into my heart, and I trusted God. I believe God showed me in that dream that I would come through, and not perish with the children.

The Refugee Trek

The Loewen family traveled in a hay wagon from January to March, 1945. They slept outdoors or in barns and begged for food along the way.

We spent two and a half months in a wagon, moving from place to place. When we came to some cities where there were still people, I would run around and beg for food. All I had brought with me when we left home was half a loaf of bread. It was so cold that our bread was frozen hard. The children wanted to drink and drink because they were so thirsty from sitting in the cold, open wagon. Their faces peeled from the cold, but they remained pretty healthy. Only once did they get sick, and then we had to stay in one place for three days.

We traveled on this wagon from January 18 to the end of March. Along the way the Kerns met friends of theirs, the Dittmans, who joined us. We slept in barns or outside, sometimes even when it was snowing. That fur coat kept the children warm and alive during those months. In those two and a half months, we didn't change our clothes or have a bath. We got lice. We didn't even have water to wash our faces, so we washed them with snow. Most of the time, I walked beside the wagon. I stayed close, because as soon as Katie couldn't see me, she started screaming. But I'd have to run off and go beg for food. I usually managed to find the children something and make my way back to the wagon. That was God's grace, for me to find the children again.

The Loewens fled so suddenly that Neta only brought half a loaf of bread. The bread was frozen solid and she had to thaw it between her legs so the children could eat it.

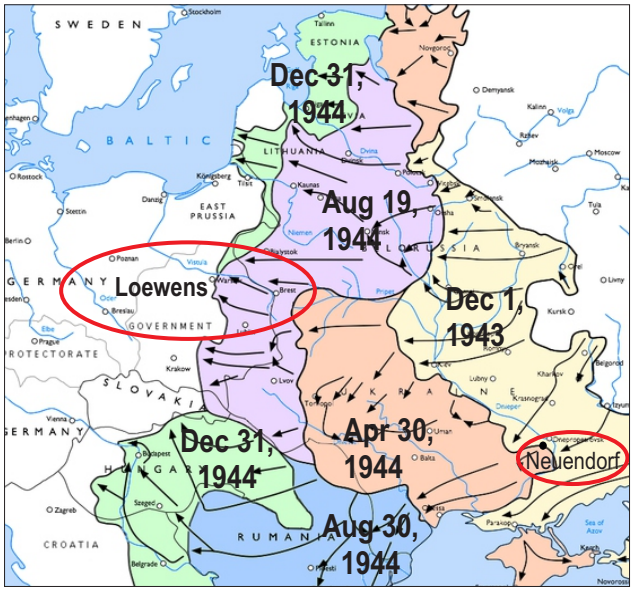
Many people lost their children. It was easy to do, because the wagons kept moving the whole time, and by the time you got back, your wagon could be somewhere else.

Once the front wasn't so near, we could sleep for a night in barns or abandoned houses. The houses were full of things: the people had just fled. Once there was bread rising in a bowl and laundry left in a tub. People were so afraid of the Russians.

We almost stayed in Klemmerwitz, in Poland. The houses were empty, we found a comfortable house to spend the night, and Frau Dittman, who was tired of fleeing, wanted to stay. She said, "We haven't hurt the Russians. Why would they hurt us?" I tried to tell them what the Russians were like, but they wouldn't listen. I told them that since they were Germans, the communists would think they were enemies. The communists would take their horses, send their husbands to Siberia, and the children to a communist orphanage. But they were tired of fleeing and wanted to stay in that house.

NETA ◆ The Refugee Trek

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)



As the Russians pushed the Germans back, the refugees fled to stay out of Russian-occupied territory. They would have been considered traitors for siding with the Germans.

All the next day, we watched wagons and jeeps with wounded soldiers go through the village. The front was so close that when bombs exploded, the windows rattled. I saw a wagon filled with bodies go on the road. That night, we laid awake in bed and listened as explosions went off close to us. Nobody was sleeping…we were all listening as the Russians came closer and closer. Suddenly, Frau Dittman shouted, "I can't stand this anymore. Let's go!" I was so relieved. We got out of bed and threw our things into the wagon. The horses were spooked from all the bombing. The front was so close that we didn't stop for 20 hours. A soldier shouted at us, "Crazy people! Why did you wait so long?"

Isaac's fur coat kept Neta and the children alive during those winter months in the wagon.

We kept going in the wagon, all night and all the next day without stopping until evening.

There's so much I could tell you about that trek. Sometimes people wouldn't give us anything or open their door for us, and we didn't eat for a whole day or two. Other times, people were kind.

Once, a little girl, about six, brought us to her house. Her mother had told her to bring some refugees home for the night. Her mother cooked us a nice hot meal and had us sleep in her bed while she slept on the floor. We were so dirty that I didn't want to, but she said, "We might be where you are soon. I hope people will be good to us."

I saw again my neighbor from Poland who had brought me the comb. She had a horrible story. Both of her little twins had frozen to death while they were fleeing. She hadn't had time to bury their little bodies, so she had to leave them by the side of the road. It was so awful. We might have frozen too, if it hadn't been for that fur coat to cover the children.

And then the Kerns, the German people who were taking me and the children along, ran out of feed for their horses, and their horses became sick. They said they couldn't take me any more, and they unloaded me and the children in the city square of Vogelsdorf, in Schläsin (Silesia), East Germany (today it is Poland).

Being abandoned with four children was a heavy responsibility. Europe had millions of refugees, and people's kindness wore thin over time. *Pictured: a refugee mother (not Neta).*

Town center of Kamienna Góra, near Volgesdorf (Ptaszków, Poland**). It is likely where Neta and her children were abandoned.**

Vogelsdorf: Abandoned & Aided

We were left sitting in the town square, and it was very cold. All day long I went to different houses, asking for food or a place to stay, but the people always said "No." And the whole day the children sat in the freezing market square with no food and no place to go. By evening, I was so tired and hungry and discouraged, that I just sat down with the children. It was getting dark, and so cold, and the children were crying. I had no food and no shelter, and I thought we would all die there.

And then a German soldier came across the marketplace. He had been standing on the other side of the market square, watching the children all afternoon, and he was angry. He shook my arm and said, "Woman, get up! Don't you hear your children crying?" And I said to him, "Yes, but what shall I do? I have gone from house to house, and nobody will take us in. I don't know where to go." So he grabbed Katie in his arm and took Fred's hand, and started walking, so fast that I had to grab Helen and Agnes and run to follow him. He came to a house where I had been turned away earlier in the day. A woman opened the door and he said to her, "Take this family. See that they get a hot meal and a warm place to sleep for the night." The woman started whining. She said, "No! My house is full and I have no room." The soldier said sternly, "You take her in. I'll come back tomorrow. If you haven't treated these people the way you should, I will shoot you." So she took us in and gave us something to eat. She spread some blankets on the kitchen floor, and we slept where it was warm that night.

A German soldier watched Neta's children crying in the square. He took the family to a nearby house and threatened to shoot the owner if she didn't house them that night.

True to his word, the next morning the soldier returned, pulling a little wagon. He had collected our few belongings that we had left in the marketplace. He put Katie and Fred on the wagon, and brought us to Landeshut, a refugee camp three kilometers away. It was only a short-term camp, he said, but we could stay there for two days. "God be with you," he said as he left.

NETA ◆ Vogelsdorf: Abandoned and Aided

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

For two days we had food and shelter at that camp, but the third day they didn't give me anything to eat. It was only meant to help for a few days. Then we had to go someplace else.

So I went back to Vogelsdorf, where I had been before. In the street, I met the lady who had put us up for the night, and this time she was very friendly to me. She said, "Where are you staying?" I said, "I have been in the refugee camp in Landeshut, but they won't give me anything to eat anymore. I have to go someplace, but I don't know where to go." She said, "I have a place for you." So she walked me to a house outside the village. An old couple lived in a tiny house next to the forest. They were named Julius and Anna Weiber. She told me, "They will take you." The Weibers were very kind. They said, "Yes, of course you can stay here. You can stay until the war is over!"

Neta and her children stayed for two weeks in a tiny house in Vogelsdorf on the edge of a forest with a kind older couple, the Weibers.

The Weibers were very old and bent over. Their house had only two rooms and a hall, and they had three goats in a barn attached to the house. They had no water in the house, and Mrs. Weiber had to carry it by herself up the hill. So I went down the hill to get water many times a day while we stayed there and carried it to the house for them. When we were there, Mr. Weiber would sneak into the room and give the children extra cream or milk. "Shhh, don't tell Mother," he would say. But Mrs. Weiber would sneak the children extra bread or eggs, and tell us, "Shhh, don't tell Father." They were both so generous to us, and always trying not to let the other one know.

The Weibers had three sons in the German army, who were fighting at the front. One had been killed, and one was missing, like my husband. Mrs. Weiber said to me, "If we do this for others, maybe someone will do this for our sons." They wanted to be good to refugees, so that maybe God would see and cause people somewhere else to be good to their sons, who were away fighting in Russia.

I gave the children a bath while we were there. I borrowed a tub, and put the children in the hot water and let them sit. I had no soap, but Mrs. Weiber gave me an egg to clean their hair with. I let them sit in the hot water and I scrubbed and scrubbed them; their old skin came off in layers, and I cleaned them until I saw pink, new skin. It had been over three months since we had had a bath! I washed our clothes, and cut Fred's hair. Then we felt much better.

I stayed with the Weibers two weeks. It was March by then, and the sun was shining. We went to the woods to gather wood for the oven, and so the children could play.

Neta and her children were able to have their first bath in two months in an old wash tub, although there was no soap to wash with. As they scrubbed and scrubbed, their skin came off in layers.

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Refugees were given ration cards, with an allotment of food supplies. When applying for one, the German officer ridiculed Neta's name and made her change it to Agnes.

It was such a relief to be at Julius and Anna Weibers' house, where we were able to wash and rest. But by this time, I was alone. I didn't know where any of the Mennonites were. Nobody knew anything about the Mennonites. I always hoped to find somebody that I knew.

In Vogelsdorf, my name was changed. I had to apply for a ration card every day so that I could buy some food. It wasn't very much food, but I managed. The *Bürgermeister* (mayor) who issued those ration cards would say every day, "What a terrible name you have! Where did your parents find that ugly name? It's worse than Constantinople!" When he saw me, he would say, "Here comes Ang-eh-*neeetta*. There goes Ang-eh-*neeetta*. Ang-eh-*neeetta, g*ive yourself a different name. One that is more German and not so old-fashioned." I finally said, "What name shall I have then?" He said, "Here is a list with a whole row of names that start with A. Angela or Augusta or something like that." "Oh, then say Agnes," I told him. He wrote down "Agnes," and that has been my name ever since.

A Train to Austria

Suddenly the Germans said, "The Russians are coming back. Women with small children and old people need to get out of the country. The men will stay and fight off the Russians when they come." There was a special train that was leaving Germany for old people and mothers with children. I registered for that train.

A man came and got me with a horse and wagon on Easter morning. As I sat in the station, I saw him take my big fur coat and throw it in the front of the wagon where he sat. I knew he wanted it. Though it had saved our lives all winter, I thought, "Oh, let him have it. It's spring." It was the end of March, and warm, and the coat was so heavy to lug around. I didn't care.

Then they loaded us in trains that were packed so full that we couldn't sit. I had a little short bench for two people, but we were five: the four children and myself. I sat and held Katie on my lap. Agnes, Fred, and Helen had to take turns sitting. Some of us always had to stand. Sometimes I stood and let the children lie down. I didn't sleep at all for two days and two nights. The third night, I almost fell over with exhaustion. It took us five days and five nights, from Schläsin to Austria. It wasn't such a far distance, but sometimes we came to a bridge, and bombs fell in front of us or behind us. Thankfully, they didn't hit the train.

NETA ◆ At the Bottom in Austria

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Regensburg, a large city in southern Germany, was bombed the day before the Loewen's train went through it.

They were taking us to Andorf. First we had to enter Regensburg. It is a big city, and it was burning. It had been bombed the night before, and the whole city was full of smoke. Even the train station had been hit, and people had to work very hard to clear the station so the train could go by. We had to stay there a whole day and night, while workers repaired the tracks. We were locked inside the train, and very afraid that the Russians would bomb us. Once a day they sent a little bit of food for us through the window. But we weren't supposed to leave the train the whole journey, which lasted five days and five nights.

At the Bottom in Austria

They unloaded us in Andorf, Austria. There, farmers would come and hire workers from among the refugees. I felt like I was sitting in the slave market, where they all come and look at you. But nobody wanted me. They all passed me by, because I was sitting there with four little children around me, and didn't look very strong. Finally, there were just me and one old lady left. She was old and she had a very big leg, which she dragged as she walked. Nobody wanted her either.

At the end of the day, there were just me and my children and this old lady were sitting in the train station, and it was getting dark. Then a Polish worker on a wagon came and loaded us up. He couldn't speak any German, and I couldn't ask him where he was taking us, but I didn't care at that point. He brought us to a schoolhouse in Eggerding that was a refugee camp. There were already 120 orphans and their teachers there, but they made room for us. We all slept very close together, on the floor covered with straw and army blankets. This lady who lay beside me had so many lice, and I could feel them crawl on me. She didn't kill any lice...she just took them and threw them away on the floor nearby.

Neta and the other refugees were left at the train station in Andorf, Austria. People came and hired workers all day. "Nobody wanted me," she said. "They all passed me by, because I was sitting there with four little children around me, and didn't look very strong." *Pictured: a refugee family (not Neta).*

The schoolhouse in Eggerding, Austria, which was a refugee camp for children at the close of the war. The Loewens slept on hay on the floor, and shared the space with 120 orphans, their house parents, and four teachers.

While we were there, I took the children into the woods every day. It was April now, and not so cold. Not far from the school house was a forest, with a dead tree. We would sit on that tree, get undressed, and kill all the lice on us we could find. Then the children would play in the forest before we would go back to the school house. I didn't like to sit inside with all the refugees. I preferred to stay outside with the children.

At the refugee camp in the school, we got very little food, just porridge for breakfast. For lunch, I would give the children a piece of bread and milk. For dinner, we had beans. I got ration cards, but they rationed us so little. Our ration food was supposed to last us a week, but we could eat everything they gave us in one day. We were so hungry.

We went to the farmers too, begging. We called it hamstering, because I offered to work for people in exchange for food. I always took Agnes, Fred, or Helen along. Katie was too little. Sometimes we got something, and sometimes not. The children were so hungry that they didn't play much. They would watch the clock on the church all day until 5 o'clock, when they got a little dinner. Once, Fred asked me if there was food in heaven. I told him, "We won't need to eat in heaven, because we won't be hungry." Then he said, "Well, then, I don't want to go there." He was about five then.

As poor as they were, Neta taught her children not to steal. They didn't pick apples off people's trees to eat, but if they fell to the ground, she would permit her children to take them.

Too hungry to play. In 1945, the Loewen children would sit and watch the hands of this church clock move slowly until 5 o'clock, when they would get a small amount of food. (Above: St. Margaret Catholic Church in Eggerding still has its clock.)

One time, we went to a house and I asked for a few potatoes. The woman said, "We don't have any potatoes." As we walked away across the yard, we passed the barn. The door was wide open, and there was a huge pile of potatoes in plain sight. Helen said, "Oh, Mom, look here! Doesn't that lady know that lying is a sin? She said they didn't have potatoes!" But these people got tired of beggars. We were not the only ones asking for food.

Many people had apple trees. When the apples started falling, I didn't know whether I should let the children pick them up or not. At first I said, "No, you shouldn't do that." But then I saw how the apples would fall on the road, and people would drive there and smash them, so I changed my mind and said the children could eat the apples. They gathered these green apples, and I'd cook them. We didn't have much.

NETA ◆ The End of the War

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

There's so much more I could tell you! People weren't always honest about rationing. A lady was supposed to give me a quart of goat's milk per day. I couldn't figure out why her milk tasted so bad. After a week, I looked over her shoulder and saw what she did. She had been watering down our milk with the water she used for hand washing; she didn't even use clean water! It tasted awful. I saw her do it and told her, "You pour that water off! I am getting good milk, not dishwater!" She was so shocked, she dropped this little pot. She turned around, and I thought she would give me a licking, she was so mad. Oh, was she *mad*! "You Russian *pock*…" (she called me all kinds of terrible names), "You wait until the Americans are here. They will send you back to Russia where you belong!" She was just terrible. I was so mad, and bitter. I left with an empty can, and no milk. But on my way home, I met a Catholic nun. She didn't say much, just "Good morning, good morning." And then she asked me, "Is this the right path to church?" But she was so friendly, and so beautiful. That one friendly face did so much for me. She looked like an angel to me, and all the bitterness went away from my heart.

Neta looks tired and worn for her 33 years. She supported her children by doing odd jobs in exchange for food, and was often at the mercy of others.

I told Razel, the neighbor girl, about that woman and her bad milk. She said, "Oh, we know that Schüster woman, and we were just wondering how long you would stand it with her." She told us to go to Brambergers, where we'd get good milk. So I went to the Brambergers for milk from then on. And they gave me *more* than they were required to; they always filled up my can.

Not everybody was honorable about rationing. Some people lied about their food supply so they didn't have to share, and an Austrian woman who was supposed to supply the Loewens with milk mixed their milk with dirty water because she hated the refugees.

The End of the War

The war finally ended on May 7, 1945. Germany lost. The Austrian people hung white flags out of every window, but they were a funny collection of flags: white pillow cases, white towels, white shirts...whatever they could find that was white. People were so happy that the war was over that they were celebrating in the streets.

The Americans were coming. In my life, I had lived under the Russians and the Germans, and now the Americans. American jeeps and army trucks came into town. They set up headquarters in Bramberger's hotel. We thought the soldiers were strange, but friendly. They sat in their jeeps with their feet up on the dashboard. They yelled "Hello," across the street at us, and threw the children candy. And they were chewing, always chew-

ing. We wondered what they ate that needed so much chewing. (We had never heard of gum before!) They were relaxed and friendly, very different from the German soldiers.

Soldiers inspected the refugee camp in the school, and cleaned it up. They replaced the old straw filled with bugs with new straw. They sprinkled DDT powder on us, and deloused us. We were so glad to be clear of the lice.

One day, I was called in to speak to an American officer. I was so worried that we would have to leave. But he wanted to know how the orphans were being treated, and whether the directors were giving out food evenly. I told him that yes, they didn't have much, but they were always fair. I was amazed that he looked out for the orphans. I thought the Austrians wouldn't have done that.

The Americans wanted to empty the school soon after that. The orphans were moved to other places. A farmer near Eggerding had asked for workers, so we were sent to live and work at his farm. But when we arrived, we found the gate locked. We sat in the wagon for long, long time while it rained on us, waiting for the farmer. But when he arrived, he was angry and didn't want us. "I ask Bramberger for field hands, and he sends me a kindergarten! Tell him I have my own kindergarten!" We had to go back. We were soaking wet, and cold, so they let us go back to the school. The *Bürgermeister* kept looking for a place for us.

At the end of July, we moved to Mühlböch's. We had a little room in a rooming house with iron bars across the windows. We had two single beds, a table and chairs, and a wood stove. Katie and I shared one bed, and the other three children shared the other, two with their head on one side of the bed, and Fred with his head on the other. I cleaned everything and put flowers in the windows with bars, and made curtains, and it wasn't bad. I wanted to be useful, so I began to clean the hall, and wash the floor every Saturday. "Thank God you're here, Frau Loewen," Mrs. Mühlböch said. Then she didn't charge me anything to live there.

There was celebrating in Eggerding and all of Europe when it was announced that the war in Europe was over on May 7, 1945. People celebrated in the streets.

Europe was divided into different zones, with the Allied victors (England, France, Russia, and the US) each occupying a portion.

When Austria was divided, Eggerding was in the American sector, *very* close to the Soviet sector. If the lines had been drawn differently, Neta might have been in the Soviet zone. The Americans and British were supposed to repatriate Soviet citizens like Neta, but the Americans were sometimes compassionate.

NETA ◆ The Refugee Trek: Ukraine to Austria

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

1. The German Army evacuated ethnic Germans from Ukraine, ahead of the retreating army. The Loewen family left Neuendorf, Ukraine with hundreds of other German Mennonites by train on October 18, 1943, for Kulm, Poland.

2. Neta, her children, her mother-in-law, Helena Loewen, and Isaac's sister Lena, stayed together in a refugee camp in Kulm for seven months, from October, 1943 to June, 1944. They shared one room in a barracks with bedbugs. Neta received word before Christmas in 1943 that her husband, Isaac was missing in action. Helena and Lena Loewen were sent away to a farm to work.

3. On June 24, 1944, as the front came closer, the Germans evacuated the refugees to Lodz, Poland.

4. Farmers took the Loewen family by hay wagon from Lodz to a Polish village called Dieterwald (Dzietrzkowice, Poland). The German Army forced native Poles to give up their homes for German refugees, who were scattered in homes throughout the countryside. The Loewens were separated from other Mennonites. The Loewens lived with a German family named the Kerns. The older Loewen children went to school in Dieterwald. They got lice, and Neta was given a comb. On January 18, 1945, the front came closer and evacuation orders were given. The Loewens fled Dieterwald, Poland on open wagon with their neighbors, the Kerns, heading for Germany.

5. After fleeing for several weeks, the tired refugees nearly stayed in Klemmerwitz (Kłębanowice, Poland), but would have been captured by Soviets. As the front approached, they fled suddenly in the middle of the night.

6. Neta and her children were abandoned in Vogelsdorf (Ptaszków, Poland) in mid-March. A Nazi soldier forced a local family to take the Loewens for a night, then they spent three days in nearby Landeshut refugee camp (Kamienna Góra, Poland). They stayed with an elderly couple, the Wiebers, for two weeks. Neta's name was changed from Anganeta to Agnes by a clerk at the municipal hall when registering for ration cards. Neta registered for a train that would take women and children west, leaving April 1, 1945.

7. Their train passed through Regensburg, Germany, soon after an air strike had destroyed part of the city.

8. The Loewens arrived in Andorf, Austria. Neta and her children sat all day at the train station, hoping somebody would hire her. Nobody did. At the end of the day, someone drove her to the nearby town of Eggerding, where there was a refugee camp.

9. The Loewen family stayed for several months in a refugee camp in a school in Eggerding, Austria. They shared a schoolhouse with 120 orphan children and four teachers. They were there on May 7, 1945, when the war ended. Eggerding was in the American-zone, and when the Americans took over, they cleaned up the lice-infected refugee camp. In July, 1945, the Loewen family moved to Mühlböchs Rooming House, across from the school. In November, 1945, the orphan children vacated the school, and in 1946, Helen, Agnes and Fred attended school there.

10. On June 20, 1948, the Loewens left Eggerding. They took a Red Cross Train from Linz, Austria, to Backnang, Germany, where they were reunited with family and other Mennonites.

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Seeking to Emigrate and Nearly Lost

I received a letter from the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in Linz, Austria, that told me I should come to Linz and fill out immigration papers for Canada. I did, but the clerk told me that next time, I had to bring my children for a doctor's exam. I did not know how Katie and Fred could walk nine kilometers to the train station, or how I could afford the train. I thought it was impossible.

But then I remembered my neighbor who delivered bread to the train station in Andorf. I asked him if he would give the smaller children a ride, and he said yes. So we bundled up Katie and Fred, and they rode in the bread wagon, while the older girls and I walked. Katie and Fred waited alone in the train station for us until we arrived.

On the train to Linz, it was very cold, and the train stopped for a long time. Then, the conductor came and said that we should all get off the train and move to the front three cars, which had heat. All the passengers did. I was slower, since I had the four children. As we walked along the train, suddenly it started to move. I grabbed Katie and shouted for the other children to get on the train. Only Helen could get on. I grabbed the nearest step and held on to the bar with Katie in my arms, and the conductor pulled me onto the train. But Agnes and Fred were too small, and they couldn't manage it.

"Please stop the train," I asked the conductor. "My children didn't get on." "Stupid woman," he said, and walked to the next car. I was panicked and could only think that we must have left Agnes and Fred behind in that station, or that they might have fallen on the tracks under the train trying to get themselves on.

But in a few minutes, another conductor came from the next car...and with him were Agnes and Fred! They ran to me and I was so relieved. That conductor had seen what was happening, and thrown the children into the train car behind us, then hopped on the train with them. I thought of how close I had come to losing my children and was nearly sick.

We arrived in Linz at 9 o'clock in the evening. We spent the night in a large building across from the train station. I couldn't sleep all night. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see Fred and Agnes and that train, and I kept starting awake. Finally, I got up and sat in a chair near the window all night.

The next day, we went to the IRO office. Each of the children had a doctor's exam, and passport pictures taken. But on the questionnaire given to me, it asked for the name and address of my sponsor. I didn't have any sponsors in Canada.

I went home, and didn't hear anything about my immigration application for two years. I thought that we were stuck in Austria.

Switching railroad cars in a crowded train station provided a terrifying example of how easy it would be to become separated.

Fred and Agnes were almost left behind at a train station. These are their passport photos from that trip.

NETA ◆ Making a Home in Austria

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Making a Home in Austria

We lived in Austria three and a half years. I started to work during this time, and people liked my work. Early every morning, I fed the Bramberger's pigs, and cleaned their stalls, and then came home to wake the children for school. When the farmers started cutting the hay, then I went and worked for food. The farmers wouldn't pay in money, but they gave me something to eat, good meals, usually. Later on, I got paid too, but you couldn't buy anything. In winter, I would wash peoples' clothes and clean their houses. I had houses in which I worked, and they were good to me. In the summer I did farm work. And I also dug graves, that first year.

Our neighbors at the Mühlböch's were the Wiesmeiers. Mr. Wiesmeier's family looked after the Catholic Church. They had to ring the bells, light the lights, and clean up the church. They also had to dig graves whenever someone died. Mrs. Wiesmeier gave me a loaf of bread whenever I helped her dig a grave. We had to do it in a hurry, in just a few hours. By the time they quit ringing the church bells, the grave was supposed to be nicely filled up with flowers on top of the grave. Sometimes we dug up graves that were 15 years old, to bury new bodies in there. We'd put the bones of the skeleton in a pile, and then after the men put the new coffin in the ground, we'd put the old bones back in too, and fill it up. I remember being surprised to find black silk that wasn't rotten yet in those older graves. Women had been buried in black silk veils with fancy lace, and that silk lasted 15 years underground! After the new coffin had been covered up, and the grave nicely made, then I could go home. I always got a good loaf of bread for doing that.

People were very kind to us. The first Christmas we were there, they came and brought us a decorated Christmas tree when the children were sleeping. They even brought presents. And Mrs. Bramberger, who I worked for, brought me a basket full of groceries.

The second year we were in Austria, the children wanted to surprise me with a birthday cake for my birthday in June. We had so little food and our ration cards didn't give us enough for that. Our neighbor, Mrs. Wiesmeier, told the children that she would bake a cake for them if they brought her the ingredients. They made a list of what they needed, and Helen and Agnes decided to go hamstering for the ingredients. They knocked on all the farmers door, asking for an egg here, a cup of flour somewhere else. As I walked home from work that day, it seemed that so many people knew it was my birthday. They all called to me, "Happy birthday," when I passed by. I didn't know how they all knew it was my birthday. But when I got home that day, the children were all waiting for me, smiling, and there was a birthday cake on the table. I was so surprised! They were so happy to have given me a birthday cake!

These were nice years, these three in Austria. The Brambergers let me plant a garden on a little piece of their land. That helped us.

Agnes helped her friend dig graves for the Catholic church and fill them with flowers. For each grave, she got a loaf of bread.

The children were able to have pets. A rabbit was given to Helen, and all the kids loved it so much. But after a week, the kids found it dead. Helen cried for days. The children had a real Catholic funeral for that rabbit, and all the neighbor children came.

Then we had a very tame little bird. A cat tore down a birds' nest from the pear tree at the end of the house. Just one of the young birds survived, and the kids kept him as a pet. They named him Hansi, and he got very tame. Sometimes, if Helen called him, he would fly from very high in the tree to sit on her shoulder. All the neighbors knew the Loewen's Hansi. The neighbors' children would catch flies to feed him. If the window to the school house was open, Hansi would fly in through the window. He would always come inside for the night. When we were eating, he would sit on the table and pick food off our plates. I'd have to chase him out and close the window if we were eating. We had that bird one summer, but he disappeared in the fall. I was glad; he would have been a nuisance indoors all winter.

I Am Not Going Back to Russia

One day, I got a letter from the government. It said that since the war was over, I was to return to my home in Ukraine. They called it repatriation.*

I was so afraid that they would send me back. The next morning, I went to see the *Bürgermeister.* He was polite, and asked me to sit down, but I was too upset. I showed him the letter, and told him that I was *not* going back to Russia. He asked me why. I told him that I would be shot since I had been friendly to the Germans, or sent to a prison camp in Siberia, and the children would be sent to a communist orphanage. I told him what life had been like under communism for us in Russia: how everything was taken from us, and the people were made to work for no pay, and starved, and sent to prison for no crimes, and always afraid. I told him, "You can shoot me now, but I am *not* going back to Russia."

The Loewens in Eggerding after the war. The kids are (L to R): Helen, 10, Fred, 6, Katie, 3, and Agnes, 8.

I must have been very loud, because an American officer heard me next door, and came in to see what was happening. The *Bürgermeister* translated for him what I had said. The two men talked for awhile. Then the *Bürgermeister* said to me, "Mrs. Loewen, if what you say is true, then you may stay in Austria. You must not go back to Russia. If you ever need anything, please find me."

So I did not have to go back, even though it was against the rules. The Americans were like that: they would not send everybody back, even though they were supposed to. The British followed the law and sent everybody back to the Soviet Union, and the Russians were terrible to the people who returned. They shot my brother-in-law, Peter.

I was all alone in Austria. Since Isaac was missing in action, I thought there might be a chance that he was still alive somewhere and that I could somehow find him. I looked for him for years and years through the Red Cross, but never found him.

I did not know where any of my family or any other Mennonites were. I thought they were all dead, or all sent back to Russia. I was safe, but I felt very alone.

*According to the Yalta Agreement (1945), all Soviet citizens were to be repatriated without choice. This was a death sentence for many, who were executed or killed in Gulag labor camps.

NETA ◆ Found and Reunited

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Arthur Voth was a Mennonite Central Committee worker who helped Neta find her family. He traveled throughout post-war Europe working to reunite families and resettle displaced Mennonites. (Right, transporting this group to Germany)

On June 22, 1948, Neta and her children were among the first group of 32 Mennonite refugees leaving Linz, Austria, for a Mennonite refugee camp in Backnang, Germany. This was part of the MCC's campaign to reunite and aid Mennonites in post-war Europe.

Found and Reunited

I was at Bramberger's field watering our garden one day when this man, Arthur Voth, came and met me. He asked if I knew where Mrs. Loewen lived. I said, "Yes, that's me." He said, "Oh! Are you a Mennonite?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Let's go in and talk."

It wasn't a long distance to the house. He was carrying a briefcase, and he asked me if there were many Mennonites here. I said, "No, I am the only one here. I don't know of any more. They must all be back in the Ukraine." And he said, "Oh, no, they are not. I have lists of some others who are here."

Then he took out a big book, and the first name he showed me was "Anganetha Dyck." I screamed, "*That's my mother*!" It so happened that she was in Austria, too, in Treffling, in the English zone. We were in the American zone. The refugees were not supposed to travel between the zones. Then he showed me more names: Helena Mantler, Katherina Volk…all names I knew. They were in Austria too, though quite far away. He found Isaac's mother and sister. My sister, Tina, was close by. He gave me her address, and I wrote her a letter that evening. I couldn't really believe that this was true until I got a letter back from her.

Mr. Voth said that the MCC went from city to city, trying to locate displaced Mennonites and reuniting families. They'd find people by their names. It's a good thing that Mennonites don't have that many names. They're all Loewens, Dycks, Friesens and the like. Loewen was a Mennonite name, which is how he found me.

My sister Tina came to visit me not long after. She brought clothes for the children, but they were all too small. "My, how they've all grown," she said, and we laughed. It had been such a long time since we had seen each other. She brought news of our family. They had all left Nieder-Chortitza by train October 5, 1943. My grandmother had died along the way. They had been able to bury her in a Russian town, Sereowka, and given her a real Christian funeral.

On a Sunday afternoon, Arthur Voth and Mr. Vandenberg came to see me. Mr. Vandenberg was with the MCC, too. They said that many Mennonites were immigrating to Canada or Paraguay, and they wondered if I was interested. "Yes," I told them. "Well, then, we must move you to an MCC camp in Germany," Mr. Vandenberg said. "That's the first step. Do you have any relatives in Canada?" I told him that my mother had a cousin in British Columbia, but that I didn't know where she lived. They told me that they would work toward moving me to Germany.

One day in June, 1948, a telegram arrived for me from Mr. Vandenberg. It said, "*Be ready Sunday morning with your children and baggage for a move to Backnang, Germany. I'll pick you up early. MCC Vandenberg.*"

When I told our neighbors, they were all sorry to see us go. Mrs. Mühlböch, our landlady, was sorry too. She told me that at first, she didn't want any refugees. "But then I watched you work so hard, and I know how honest you are," she said. She told me that everybody had come to like us and respect us. "Agnes, you have many friends here," she said. "We would like you to stay."

I thanked for her for her kindness to us, but told her how I missed my family and the other Mennonites. The next morning, a truck came to pick us up. A group of friends gathered and stood in the rain to say goodbye. Some gave us money for our journey, and some even cried to see us go.

We went by truck to the train station in Linz, where we joined a group of Mennonite refugees going to Germany. I recognized somebody whom I knew from Nieder-Chortitza: Maria. It was so nice to see a face from home after so many years! But she acted strangely, and pretended that she didn't remember me. I was confused why she acted that way.

We all boarded a Red Cross boxcar for the journey that the MCC had arranged to take us to Germany. I put our luggage in one corner of the boxcar, and had the children sit on it. When it was night, Maria's husband said, "This half of the boxcar is for my family." We were amazed to see them claim half of the boxcar for themselves. They spread out their blankets on the floor and slept in comfort, while the rest of us crammed into the other half. All night, I had to sit up, holding Katie, because there wasn't enough space for me to lie down. After being away from my people for so long, the first time I met someone I knew from home, this is how she acted! But there are good and bad people everywhere.

Reunited with Isaac's mother after the war in a refugee camp in Germany. Neta and Helena Loewen (center), and the children, who are (L to R) Agnes, 10, Fred, 8, Katie, 5, and Helen, 12.

NETA ◆ No Permanent Home in Germany

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The next morning, the children and I were able to move to a car with seats. There weren't many people there, so we could lie down and go to sleep. We stayed the rest of the trip in those seats. Strangers were kind and shared their food with us. When we got to the border, I found that I couldn't exchange my Austrian money anywhere. Inflation had made it worthless. I gave it all to the customs agent, and asked him to give it to the Red Cross.

We arrived at the MCC camp in Sulzbach, Germany, and I received 40 Deutsche mark per person. That camp was in an old school building. A large classroom was divided into little cubicles by grey army blankets hung from wires around the room. We had no privacy, but got two bunkbeds and a small table. That was our new home.

The day after we arrived, my mother and sisters, Tina and Anni arrived. We were so happy. My mother's hair had all gone white, but her spirit was the same. In the afternoons, people crowded around her in this refugee camp, like they had at home, to hear her stories. Anni had been shot, and had a hard time walking, but her wounds were healing and she was so cheerful. Tina was 28, and her son Viktor was 10. Fred broke his arm in the refugee camp.

No Permanent Home in Germany

A few months later, we moved to a larger refugee camp in Backnang, Germany. My children and I shared a "room" (just a part of a large room, separated by blankets pinned to ropes that separated our space from other families) with my mother, two sisters, and nephew; there were four bunkbeds for the nine of us. We had plenty of food, and mealtimes were fun. The children went to school and church, sang in a children's choir, and we were busy and happy once again, and with our own people.

I had no sponsor, and I did not qualify as a worker, so Canada had rejected my application for immigration. Many refugees, including Tante Nüt, were going to Paraguay, so I decided that I would apply as well. One day I went to file in the MCC office, but Peter Dyck, an MCC worker, asked me why I was applying for Paraguay. "Because it's a warm country," I told him. "Wait a little longer," he said. "Paraguay would be hard for you. The jungle is no place for a widow with four small children. Canada would be much better." "I was rejected for Canada," I told him. "Don't worry," he said, "We haven't tried everything yet. Maybe something will open up."

Neta and the children had to move from one refugee camp to another in Germany. They concluded that there was no permanency for them in Germany, and sought to immigrate to Canada.

My mother and sister Anni, and Isaac's mother and sister were accepted to Canada, and sent to Gronau. In 1949, they left for Canada. The same year, Tante Nüt from Nieder-Chortitza left for Paraguay, and my sister Tina joined her new German husband in another town. I was left alone.

The children and I moved from one refugee camp to another. We went from Sulzbach to Backnang, to Gronau, to Eppe, to Fallingbostel. We couldn't find a permanent home in Germany.

Accepted to Canada, Immigrants at Last ◆ NETA

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

Passport photos taken in Germany in 1949, before the Loewens came to Canada.

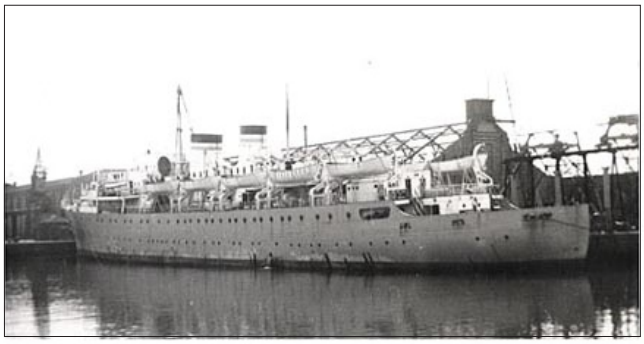
Accepted to Canada, Immigrants at Last

One day I got a letter from Isaac's mother in Canada. She said that her cousin, John Tschetter, had agreed to sponsor our family to come to Canada. I was so happy that I bought candy for all the children in the refugee camp.

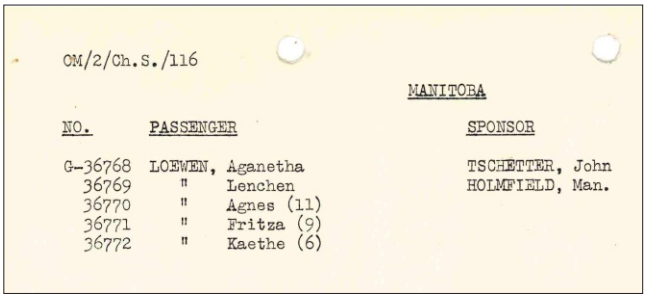
The 13 of us who had been accepted, which included my cousin and his family, were told to go to Naples, where we could travel on a freighter. We took a train over the Alps. On August 20, 1949, we boarded the *Charlton Sovereign* and sailed to Halifax, Canada. The children were very seasick on the voyage, but I wasn't. The food was not good, and the ship was dirty. I volunteered to clean the latrines, and spent much of my time on deck.

On the morning of September 3, 1949, we docked in Halifax. We were given $40 to buy food in Canada before leaving the ship. The customs agent looked at our passports, stamped them, and moved on. We weren't even searched on our way into the county!

We took a train to Montreal. We spent a whole day waiting in the train station for our connection. My cousin's wife and I went to buy food. We had never seen as much food in our lives as was in that grocery store! I had never seen bananas before either...I bought some for us, and lots of peanuts. And we got ice cream for the children. It was a celebration of us being in Canada. We thought Canada was a very rich country.



The Loewen family sailed on the *Charlton Sovereign* to Canada. The ship departed Naples, Italy on August 24, 1949, and arrived in Halifax, Canada on September 3, 1949.



CM/2/Ch.S./116

MANITOBA

NO.	PASSENGER	SPONSOR
G-36768	LOEWEN, Aganetha	TSCHETTER, John
36769	" Lenchen	HOLMFIELD, Man.
36770	" Agnes (11)	
36771	" Fritza (9)	
36772	" Kaethe (6)	

The *Charlton Sovereign's* records, showing the Loewens as passengers.

Neta had never seen food in such abundance as she did her first trip into a Canadian grocery store. She had never seen bananas before, either, so she bought some to try with the children. "Canada is a very rich country," she thought.

NETA ◆ Escaping Siberia: Refusing to Go East

Agnes Dyck Loewen (1912-2003)

The Mennonite people were all instructed to leave their homes and cross the river. The Soviet plan was to evacuate the entire German population to Siberia. The Loewens and their friends the Klassens attempted an escape instead.

The cows were already driven into a big pen, ready to be transported out of the area, when all the ladies of the village came to take our cows back. Each lady had a rope and a stick. These men, who were all on horses, were swearing at us and hitting us with their whips...but they were just pretending. I believe that they didn't really want to take our cows, and they were glad that we were so brave! We took our cows and went home. I thought it was so great! We were all one!

In Nieder-Chortitza, the women had done that too, refused to give up their cows. But there, one lady had started it. They took her to Siberia, and she never came back. Maybe they shot her or something. But in our village, there was no leader. We were all one. We did it together. (We kept our cows hidden in the barn for the rest of the evacuation).

It took a couple of weeks to move everything across the river. The Russians had planned to send all of us (German-Russians) over the river too, to Siberia. Because we were Germans, they didn't trust us anymore. But they didn't have time to carry out that plan.

Escaping Siberia: Refusing to Go East

One night the Russians told us, "Get ready. Tomorrow you go across the river." My husband and his friend Mr. Klassen, who was a tractorist too, went for the horses and wagon. The Klassens had seven children, and we had three. We packed some food and put all the children in the wagon, tied our cows on the wagon, and went out in the night. It looked like we were ready to go across the river in the morning, but we went the other way, west instead of east. We passed a big corn field, and it was full of German people speaking *Platts-Deutsch*. It made us feel better. We thought we were the only ones fleeing the Russians!

We had to travel on the big road, the highway, and we met many Russian soldiers. Twice we were stopped by the Russians. They said, "*Stoi*! Stop! Where are you going, and what do you have on your wagon?" We would say, "Children!" They came to the wagon and pulled off the blanket. We had told the children, "If they do that, you all scream!", so all ten of the children screamed. The Russian soldiers swore and quickly covered up the children again. But then they said, "You're going the wrong way! You have to go east! Why are you going west?" We said, "We are not from here; we're lost." They told us, "You have to turn around." So twice we did that. We'd turn the wagon around as *slowly* as we could, and travel east so *slowly* that the soldiers got impatient and didn't want to wait for us, so they would leave us. The third time that happened, though, the Russian soldiers wanted to help us and take us along with them. Mr. Klassen and my husband told them that a wheel was broken on the wagon. They started repairing our "broken" wheel, but did it so slowly that the soldiers couldn't wait for us, so they left us. But we felt that had been too close. So we left the highway because it was too dangerous.

We went off the road into the valley and traveled across fields all night. We hid all day in cornfields, and then by night we went west again.

Once we hid in a valley where there wasn't any water, so the men had to go looking for some. Isaac and his friend snuck into an almost-deserted village to refill our water jugs, and then returned. They hadn't wanted to attract any attention, so they hadn't asked many questions.

It was a beautiful day in that valley. It was August, and we had our cows. We milked the cows, and we had some food. It was almost like a picnic! Fred was still very weak and sick, but other than that it was wonderful.

All the next night we traveled on wagons between fields of corn and grain, and the next morning, we arrived at a wheat field along a highway. We could see army trucks and tanks on the highway. The men went to investigate. When our husbands came back they said, "We only saw Germans on the highway. All the Russians are gone, and the Germans are here!"

Then they walked into a village and talked with German soldiers. They even brought some soldiers back with them. The soldiers were amazed that they would find Germans living so deep into Russia. Our men spoke good German and good Russian, too. The soldiers said, "We need men like these to translate." They wanted to take them along to work for the German army. "No!" Mrs. Klassen and I said. "Do you see all our children? We need our men!" "The war will soon be over, and then you can have them back!" they said. But we told them no: we were all going home.

A STRANGE ALLIANCE: Understanding the Mennonite Affinity for the Nazi Army

Germans in Russia had been targeted by the Communist Party since its beginning. In 1941, the government had ordered a mass relocation of thousands of Russian-born Germans from their homes to exile in Siberia as war with Germany loomed large.

Escaping forced exile, many Mennonites fled *toward* the invading army, hoping to receive better treatment under German rule than they had under Russian rule. The Germans greeted them warmly, expressing surprise that there were Germans living so deeply in Russia. They permitted them to return to their homes once the front had moved on and enveloped them into the German Empire they were creating.

Most Mennonites had no idea about the ethnic purging that the S.S. did as Germany invaded Poland and Ukraine. They experienced the reverse side of those dark racial policies: an affinity with the German people. The Germans welcomed them as citizens, considering the Russian-born Germans *"Volksdeutsche,"* or fellow Germans, regardless of citizenship or birthplace. In this way, their German ethnicity, which had been of such detriment to them during the last 50 years in Russia, was finally an asset.

Although they were expected to board German soldiers in their homes and supply food to the army, the Germans permitted Mennonites freedoms they hadn't seen in years: the freedom to worship, the right to select teachers from their own population, participation in government, and a return to private property.

Knowing that Germany had the loyalty of the Soviet-Germans, the German army evacuated them from the Soviet Union in 1943 as they retreated from Russia, promising them homes in Germany or Poland once they left Ukraine. Unfortunately, they fulfilled their promise by displacing native Poles from their homes in the Wartegeau region of Poland, another harmful effect of the racial policies of the Nazi regime.

A German woman greeting Nazi soldiers in Ukraine.