

VOLHYNIAN VILLAGE ADVENTURE TOUR

September 7 - 17, 2012

Written by the 2012 Group Members and Compiled by Ann Kersten

Although each of us had our own reasons for visiting Volhynia, we all wanted to better understand our heritage. One member of our group, Erhard Keck, was born in Dubrovets and wanted to return to his birth village. I, Ann Kersten, actually have no ancestors from the area but my father-in-law was born in Volhynia and I wanted to make the trip in honor of my husband.

In addition to exploring our roots, it was a special blessing to worship together with other believers in the *Evangelical Baptist Church*, to hear the stories of the men in the Addiction Recovery Center, and to visit the old *babushkas* in the Samaritan Ministries widows' house in Pulin. We experienced city life and country life, excellent cuisine and encountered wonderful people on our tour group.

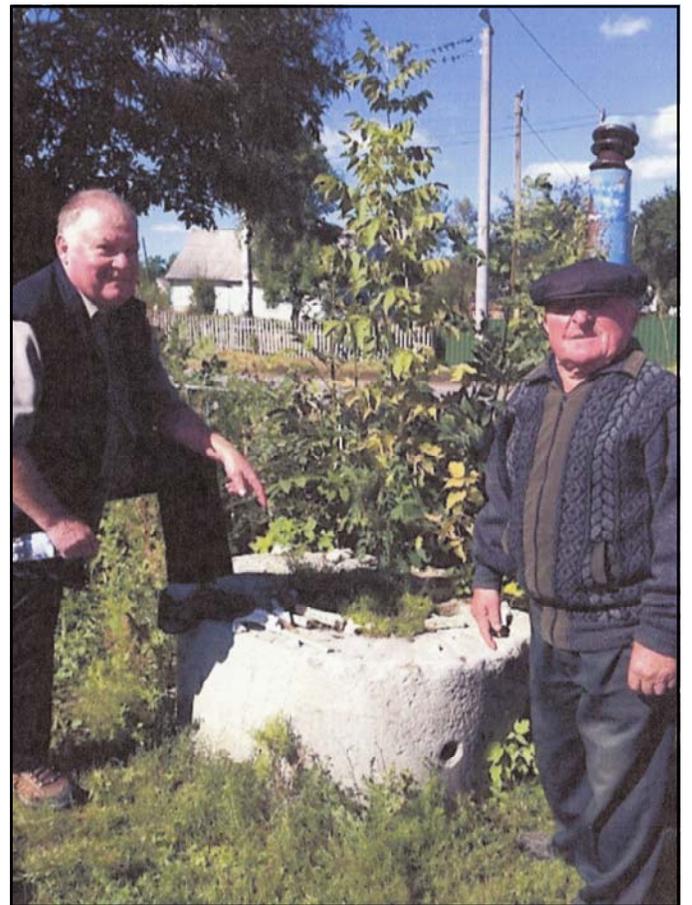
It was definitely a memorable experience that made us admire the courage of our forefathers as they survived the horrors of war, collectivization, famine, repression and immigration to a new country but it also made us sad for those who were left behind. The failure of the collective farm in a country that is so rich with natural resources, the high poverty, unemployment and addiction rates can only be attributed to a corrupt government and a failed social experiment.

Don Miller and Alex Brzhezitsky also enabled us to do a little sightseeing in Zhitomir, Radomyshl, Kamanets-Podylsky, and Kiev. We found our accommodations to be comfortable and the tour to be well-planned. We appreciated the picnic-style lunches prepared by Don's wife, Nancy and Patty, who traveled with Don and Nancy and works with the Samaritan Ministries.

Pulin - Iwanowitsch

written by Nelson Otto - Minneapolis, Minnesota

Two experiences stand out in my mind as being the most



Nelson and a Ukrainian gentleman who directed the group to the old mill in Pulin

meaningful on this trip.

The first was a visit to an old flour mill on the outskirts in Pulin. Though the mill was built in 1911, the year my great-great grandfather, Ludwig Otto and his family resettled to Nikolayevka, Siberia, I couldn't help but feel a kinship to the mill. Ludwig, too, owned a mill in Pulin. I was told he had built it himself and carved out a granite millstone. I had

hoped to locate some tangible connection to the mill. Though I knew this was not the mill he had built, this was the closest I came to it. I even imagined that the millstone might actually have been carved by him.

The second was a visit to the “mother church” in Neudorf. The church was built in 1907, seated 2000 people, and was considered to be one of the most beautiful churches in all of Russia. This is the church where people from miles around, including Pulin, gathered the first Sunday of each month. As I walked around in the building, I stopped to linger on the entrance stairs with the realization that Ludwig and Barbara Otto, my grandparents, along with their family of ten children, five boys and five girls, shared the exact same sacred place. My visit there was over too quickly. I wanted to linger in their presence.

I had a lot of questions before I went on the tour. I had even more after the tour. I wish I had been more attentive to my history when I was younger.

Toporischtsche

written by Ann Kersten - Tucson, Arizona

Toporischtsche sits just off the highway between Zhitomir and Korosten, about 30 kilometers north of Zhitomir. This is the village where my husband’s father, Adolph Kersten, was born. Since we didn’t spot a likely person to give us directions (a GPS, as we called them) as we arrived in the village, we went to the village administration building across the street from the Russian Orthodox Church. Through the help of a woman working there and another villager, we located a German man, who still lives in the area, Rheinhold Fugman. He was born in 1943 in Federowka.



Don Miller points to Linden Trees near Komarowka



Rheinhold Fugman and Ann Kersten

Rheinhold gave us some helpful background information. He informed us that there were two German colonies associated with Toporischtsche: Halynowka, a Lutheran colony; and Komarowka, a Baptist one. He explained that there are four cemeteries in or around the village. He thought the one most likely used by the German Baptists would be the one which sits on the boundary between Toporischtsche and Komarowka.

When we arrived at the huge Ukrainian cemetery, we found the German section in it to be much as all the other German cemeteries we visited: overgrown, almost headstoneless, and having been raided by grave-robbers. Rheinhold tickled his memory to come up with a few surnames of Germans who had lived in the area. Eventually, he came up with Merck, Stoltz (died here), Lanz, Shuck, and Julius Lass, who emigrated to the USA.

Next Rheinhold lead us down a “wagon trail,” where we parked the vans in a field beside another abandoned apple orchard. We learned that the German Baptist church and school had been close by. A stand of linden trees reportedly marked the former location of the school. Don and I walked through the weeds until we were within the wooded area. The linden trees seemed to have been planted in two rows. Rheinhold told us the church and school had been destroyed during WWII.

I had an “eleventh hour” discovery in the Zhitomir Archives. I had been told that the East Prussians, the group to which my father-in-law belonged, had purchased a large tract of land upon their arrival in Volhynia. The land was part of the village of Toporischtsche. With the aid of my translator, Natali, we found the record of the purchase of that land in

August 1865 with the signatures of 38 Germans who were involved in that purchase. I am in the process of trying to get the document translated. I am sure this will be of interest to those who have their roots in the same area.

Dubrowetz, Cholosna Tschermoschna
written by Daphne Keck, nee Hofmann

This was a very special adventure for the three Keck brothers: Erhard, Wilmard and Manfred, to return to Dubrowetz where Erhard was born and see the farm place and school of their mother, Tamara Keck (nee Bayer). Uncle Leonard Bayer, (Tamara's brother) had given detailed instructions on how to locate the farm yard from the cemetery at Dubrowetz. The buildings were gone but the pear tree and apple trees which Uncle Leonard often spoke about, were still there. We brought home a pear from his tree which we hope will not be too brown before we give it to Uncle Leonard in Edmonton.



Fred, Will, Dephne, Erhardt and Ellie Keck by the cemetery across from the Bayer Farm

We knew very little about our father's family, just that our grandfather, Gottlieb Keck, had been sent to Siberia and a brother to our father, Waldemar, had disappeared sometime in the 1930's. Unfortunately, the archival file in Zhitomir for 1911 when our father was born was missing. However, our translator, Vika, helped us find a record of Julius Keck, who came from the same area at Krasnich as our father. Julian had been shot in 1937 for writing a letter to Poland stating that things were difficult plus the fact that he was considered to be a *kulak*, in that he owned 42 hectares of land and six or seven cows. Apparently, this was considered treasonous and capitalistic. We were able to get contact information for a granddaughter of Julian who had written from Siberia in 1996, re-

questing information about her grandfather. Hopefully, this contact will lead us to connections with our missing relatives.

Erhard's wife, Ellie, was able to find records of her Edel grandfather, as he petitioned, along with other residents of Cholosna, to purchase the land they were farming in the early 1900's. Daphne, Wilmard's wife, had a surprise when the archivist, questioned if her Hoffman ancestors were part of the Hoffman nobility but unfortunately there were no records found to support that idea.

Traveling the paths through the bush and over the fields gave us an appreciation for the route our mother, Tamara, must have taken as she went to school in Tschermoschna and probably worshiped with other Baptists in the Neudorf Church. While we had a glimpse of the physical setting, Don Miller, our tour guide, was able to fill in the political and historical setting that our parents encountered as Stalin ruthlessly plundered the area and our Keck parents retreated with the German army in 1943, and finally immigrated to Canada in 1948.



Alex and Don by the old Morgrowka well



Eddetta and Anton's Wagon Ride

Morogowka and Karlswalde

written by Eddetta Beier Grant of Sand Springs, Oklahoma

This tour was the trip-of-a-lifetime! The hardest part was all the flying but it was well worth the loss of sleep.



Tombstone in Tuczyn

and wondered if this was where my Grandfather Emil Beier's younger brother, Benjamin, had been buried after he died at the age of one year. I definitely felt a connection with that location.

Boris also told Alex of an old well which we located. We were told the well was over 100 years old. It was probably

The trip to the State Archives in Zhitomir proved most interesting and productive. I was fortunate enough to find a record of my Great Uncle Julius Beier's birth in a village I had not previously heard of, called Morogowka. Nothing remains of the German colony that once existed there but the tour guide was able to find a local resident by the name of Boris, who led us to where it had once been. I stood on the ground where the cemetery had stood

three feet by three feet square lined with oak or some other type of hard wood which had fossilized and turned to what they called ironwood. The well was spring fed and the water clear. Alex tasted it and Don suggested that my ancestors had probably used the spring in the early years of their settlement.

Probably the highlight of my trip was riding in one of the many wooden wagons like we passed in just about every village we visited. The last village stop for the tour was that of Karlswalde where my Great Grandfather, Jacob Karcher, had once lived. In trying to find directions to the village, we stopped at one of the roadside markets. Our tour translator, Alex, went to get directions. A horse and wagon had stopped at the market. Alex returned and said for 100 grivnas the man would let me ride in his wagon part of the way to Karlswalde. So, I climbed into the wagon and we started on our journey.

The man's first name was Anton. He chatted up a storm. I didn't understand a word, but I did keep asking if we had reached Karlswalde. Fortunately, the rest of the tour group was following in the vans so I wasn't too worried. Alex had also found an old *babushka* who remembered playing with a German family by the name of Bender. She showed us where the church had once stood. We also found the wooden cross with some grave stones which had been found when the fields were plowed during the collective farm era. There were none with my family name but it was still a sacred place to me.

It was a wonderful trip and a wonderful group with whom to share the experience. The trip did indeed turn out to be a trip-of-a-lifetime. The travel there and back was exhausting but well worth all the effort that was put into this search for the past. Don Miller and Alex Brzhesitsky are to be commended for such a wonderful adventure.



Harold with Anna Petrovich