



# UKRAINE 2007

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The Nikkels and Hildebrands visit to the motherland.  
—written by Millie Hildebrand

Thanks to Ed and Millie Hildebrand — it is from their blog,  
<http://edandmillieinromania.blogspot.com>,  
that the text for this booklet was taken.





# Going after what went before

## Nikkels and Hildebrands visit Ukraine 2007

Here begins a tale of a journey that has been taken by many persons in similar shoes. I deliberated letting it go, not because I didn't want to write it, but because the sequence of events is surely too common to be interesting. But then again, this is not someone else's story; this one belongs to us, Millie and Ed and Sue and Rudy, who undertook an excursion on the paths of our ancestors who lived in the Ukraine 100 years ago. Two years ago, what began as an enthused dozen second generation would-be gravestone hunters ended being two couples, when all was "said and done"! Sue and Rudy Nikkel and Ed and Millie Hildebrand, resolute from the start, set their plans in motion for a joint Eastern

Europe holiday in July '07. Rudy and Sue arrived in Romania on the 21st, where they assumed the distinction of being the second guests in what Ed and Millie hope will be a long line of visitors to come. By this time, the blistering heat wave was old news, and our friends bore up remarkably in spite of the tiny AC unit that puffs and wheezes in a dark corner of our huge apartment! We spent the first few days in a combination of outings that included a trip to Sinaia, where a night on top of the mountain offered a reprieve from the 40-degree heat.

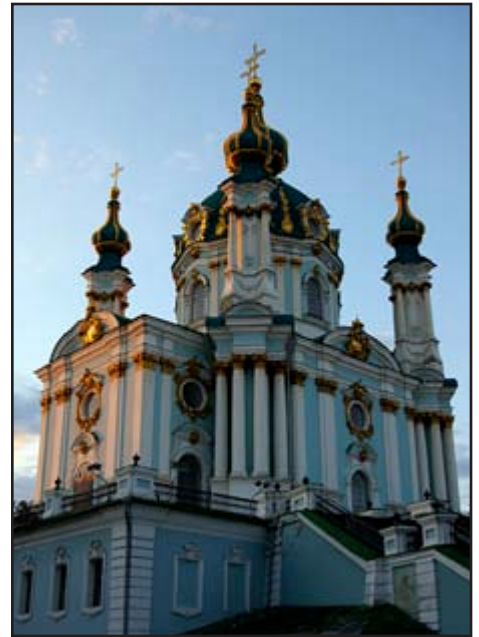
We were happy to trade the cool air and breath-taking view for the no-star rooms and definitely-no-star food. A grueling

600 meter hike DOWN the mountain the next morning, where the heat crept up on us, canceled all memories of the cool evening before.

But the chilled beer that followed restored the balance. And that's how it went – we continued to enjoy each other's company through a tour of Peles Castle, a visit to the People's Palace, dinners out, and other sight-seeing morsels in Bucharest, with which readers of this blog have become familiar through past entries. Rudy and Sue were astonished by the bustle of Bucharest's rising economy evident in the construction boom, the plethora of high-end auto dealers, the Porsches, BMWs and Mercedes and exclaimed constantly, having had 'no idea' that Bucharest would be so prosperous! It was great to see it through their eyes, and we drew reference to their first days in Romania as our journey unfolded.







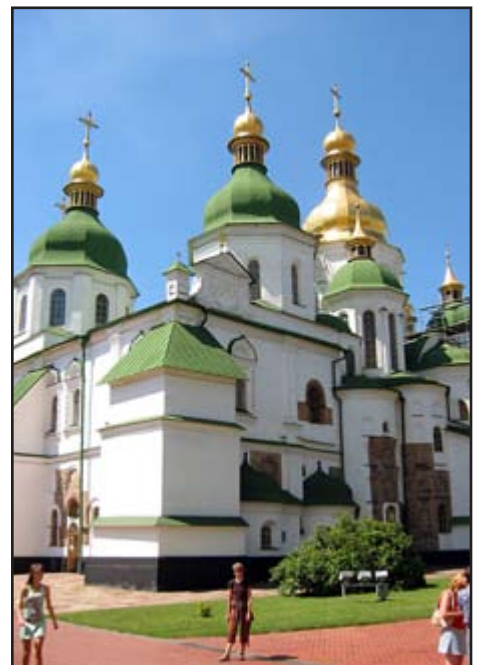
## Thursday, July 26

After a jog via Vienna, we deplane in Kiev, where we will savour the pleasures of beautiful architecture and excellent food, all the while trying to unravel the Cyrillic alphabet in our western terms! Sue has arranged Hotel Ukraine for us, and it towers over the square that will become our front yard in the next days. The red-haired receptionists at the desk can manage in English, a service that we won't take for granted as the week rolls on. We try for the less expensive 'standard' rather than a 'superior' room, but one look at us and we are informed, 'You don't like it.' The hotel itself presents the air of a museum piece, and each floor features a female keeper-of-the-keys, providing us the opportunity to practice saying 'thank you' in Ukrainian. Our ninth floor rooms are great and the view of Kiev is spectacular. Once unpacked and back out in the square, we have a go at ordering drinks in an outdoor cafe, walk for hours along

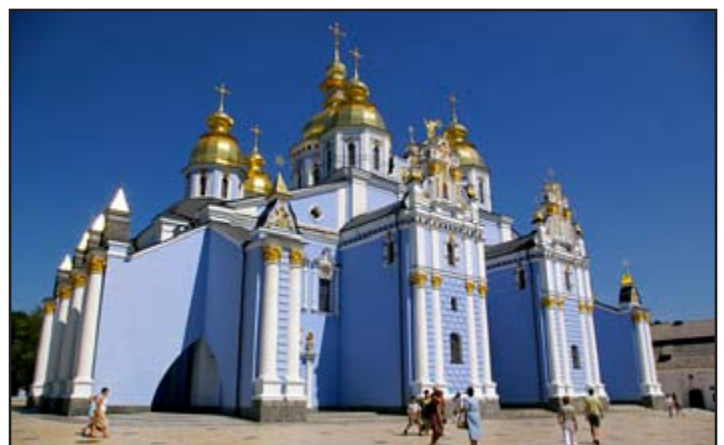
the river, check out the street famous for its craft vendors, test the vodka tradition and eat chicken kiev. Why not?

## Friday, July 27

A bland breakfast (only with room card) with a hard-earned second cup of coffee is served by ladies in black, and an equally bland discussion about the old-world decor is arrested by Rudy who announces that frankly Sue, he didn't notice anything about the curtains! The perfect weather begs a walk into town. We decide on a cathedral route via the Great Gate of Kiev. Finding it is the first of many challenges presented by the language barrier, as it appears that no one speaks ours. Kievites are quick to insist on 'no English'. Eventually we learn that it's often a matter of self-consciousness, and that a requisite series of gestures, pointing, and procuring of pictures in guidebooks extends a measure of equality that allows



our rescuer the upper hand. We find the Great Gate and realize that we walked right by it last night!







Many pictures later, this is followed by visits to the stunningly restored St. Sofia, to St. Michael's where we were more enamoured of a throng of wedding parties being photographed all over the place, and finally to St. Andrew's where we stand in the church itself, among the wedding goers, cake and all! We have some time left, and decide to squeeze in a visit to the Chernobyl Museum. This turns out to be one of the more provocative moments in our day, as the tour guide leans strongly toward deriving meaning from this awful event, including directing us towards its prophecy in the Bible. The museum is superbly set up. The evening ends with supper and a climb back to St. Andrews, where the formerly promised violin concert has morphed into an amateur soprano/cello/piano gig featuring an old doll at the keyboard and a vocalist trained in the 'no need to get nervous just stare at the exit sign and you won't even notice the audience' technique. We all agree that the cellist was great, which calls for a celebration.



## Saturday, July 28

This morning we get even less coffee, and a mini-drama over a missing bun provides some entertainment but never mind, we have a full day to look forward to and we are anticipating our nocturnal train ride deep in the heart of das Vaterland. Besides, it's Ed and Millie's anniversary! First, we cab to Lavra. This must-see is well worth a trip to its internet site, as the following nutshell scarcely describes it: Lavra, a monastery founded in the 11th century, is famous for its caves that stretch hundreds of metres underground. We're thinking that we'll be back by noon. Well! Didn't we luck into the annual service of St. Vladimir, replete with the Metropol himself and his entourage of clerics and choirs!

We, bareheaded and in shorts, are soon as captivated by the procedure as the hundreds of worshippers who barely take notice of us. The ceremony is long, and an assembly of confession stands materializes. It's hard not to gawk as the queues get longer and longer, some people crying, some clutching lists to give to the priests. The Metropol security pulls up in a procession of the latest Mercedes-Benz. Are we only imagining an air of impatience as drivers scan the flock for signs of winding up the morning? The scene spawns much discussion among the four



of us. Now it's time to think about our sightseeing itinerary, and we decide that our only real option is to find a tour guide. Sue and I haggle with the only one in sight; this amounts to zero discount and so, for a healthy 200'grievnas', she consents to taking us on a two-hour tour. It all turns out well, in spite of her saucy stabs at our Hotel Ukraine status. ('My customers from the Hyatt, bla bla bla...') Oh well, she speaks good English and is well versed in the history of Lavra. Sue and Millie buy head scarves and we're ushered into the caves where the embalmed bodies of the hermit monks are 'resting' under glass, their hands ('relics') exposed. She tells us that the monks, having dug themselves into these caves, subsisted on food and water passed through tiny openings in the cave where they remained until death. Mind-boggling. It's been a big day somehow, and we agree to part company for a few hours. This, being part of the agreement established by the foursome in advance of the trip, is met without question. Amusingly enough, the couples learn later that they ended up in exactly the same neighborhood and eating the





same thing! Clubhouse sandwiches. This penchant for similar thinking intensifies in the days to follow. Back at the hotel, we pack up and prepare ourselves for our train trip to Zaporozhye. We are very excited and photograph every possible pose getting onto the train.



*"Will You Still Like Me in the Morning?" or "How much room does anyone really need?"*



I will leave it at this: If four people can eat, sleep, visit and laugh their heads off in an 8x4 foot space, how many intimates could we entertain in our houses back home? Looking back, these were some of our best times. Given Sue's organizational skills, Ed's omnipresent sense of wonder and Rudy's bedtime stories, what could possibly be missing? Well, maybe water, but still... What a trip!

## Sunday, July 29

We have arrived. We have also overslept and almost missed getting off the train, but we have arrived. We speculate about Victor being here to meet us, as none of us has actually talked to him in the last week. But as we stumble off, we are met by a perky fellow in suspenders and we know it can't be anyone else. Victor scurries us to his car, everyone is talking at once, the four of us still shell shocked from our sudden ejection off the train.

## VICTOR



Re-writing this journal from the vantage point of its aftermath, I can hardly find the words to describe this remarkable man. Charles Dickens would have done him justice in print. Victor Penner is of Mennonite descent. His grandfather, Peter J. Penner, was a highly respected teacher and preacher in the Chortiza area and beyond. Victor has lived his life in the Ukraine, is married to a Ukrainian woman, and appears to have the advantage of knowing the Mennonite story from the inside out! He is a flurry of information, insight, viewpoint and opinion which he renders in a way that would match the finest history educators. He is passionate but he is composed. He is indefatigable, even in the daily stifling 40 degree heat. He can turn any comment or inquiry into a story that always ends with a casual, 'That's how it is in this country' or 'That's how it was.' As the days roll by, we reflect on our great fortune to have acquired this man's time. Ed and I ruminate on having tried this trip without Sue and Rudy, our link to Victor.

This journal would hardly have read as follows. Immediately upon "takeoff" we are immersed in a flow of information that weaves in and out of a number of topics. We are driving through the former Schoenwiese section of what was then called Alexanderpol, and Victor recounts the history of the Mennonites in this area while identifying architectural details in former Mennonite buildings. In between, he points out the 'modern' features of Zaporezhye. The Hoeppner-Bartsch story arrives in the discourse, but it's not exactly the one we know. It has a new twist, and moments like this will become the beauty of being in Victor's corner. We acknowledge Lenin's statue, to which he responds, "Ye-e-e-es, if you want to lay flowers, I'll wait for you!" He chuckles and takes that as his cue to regale us with his position of that part of Ukraine's history. "Our big brother", he concludes. We are deposited at the Intourist Hotel with a promise for pickup at 9:30. Now we are more than impressed with Sue's planning power. A fine hotel indeed, with English-speaking receptionists. Bonus. We hurry through showers and a full-course buffet breakfast, and we're ready for Victor on the dot.

## THE ISLAND OF CHORTIZA

Our drive to the island is crammed with information. Victor seasons its history with peppery anecdotes that don't stop just because we're parking the car. We walk to the water's edge but it takes a while because it's hard to walk and talk and listen and ask questions all at the same time! And now we are standing on the edge of the river. "Der schoene Dnieper", Ed remarks repeatedly, recalling the way it was sighed by his dad, time and again.







We concur that it's small wonder the first settlers were non-too impressed with the scouting aptitudes of their leaders, Hoepfner & Bartsch! The island is hilly and appears hardly arable. Twenty-four families made their homes here, possibly all of them irritated beyond measure. Imagine their reunions! Victor talks about the importance of the river, and its place in the developing economy of the Mennonites as they stuck it out in their new digs. Included are references to the east/west communities separated by the river (jant zied?) that begat eventual rivalry, to water resource through river dam projects, sturgeon fishing rights, how the poorer families on the island provided refuge for the children of their wealthy relatives from the east side, changes over time... we can hardly absorb it all.



We are introduced to our first cemetery. Formerly a massive Mennonite graveyard, only a few stones remain among the myriad of Ukrainian graves, and Victor teaches us how to recognize them. We hear how the 'missing' tombstones disappeared over time, wrested from their moorings and recycled into foundations of new buildings in the area. Those left behind were either too heavy or too deep under the lilac bushes to merit the trouble. An additional feature of each Mennonite grave is the blooming marigolds.

Victor explains that a German woman is a devotee of these sites, because a Mennonite family had given her refuge in a dangerous time. In this way she continues her appreciation for their kindness. There's a vague metaphor in these marigolds rising up among all the other plots. Victor takes us to the edge of the cemetery and points to a spot many metres beyond its fence. This is where the Hoepfner monument stood. It appears that, over his dead body was Jacob going to be buried in the selfsame cemetery that bore his adversaries! As the story goes, widespread rumours regarding misappropriation of public funds, land titles and general jealousy of his success on his own superior property effected enough fury to get him thrown into jail! Not his finest hour. How he would have cheered to see this monument hauled off to Steinbach, to take its rightful place in history! We have a weird sensation reflecting on this, Steinbachers that we are, (or have become), and Ed muses

on the irony of referring to him as his great-great-great grandfather, which he was! Back in the cemetery, we take way too many pictures, deeming that we may discover one of these tombstones to be that of some long-lost relation following much future sorting through the family tree.

As we pass through Burwalde and Nieder Chortiza, we become increasingly adept in recognizing buildings built by the Mennonites.

The exacting high standard of the brickwork has ensured the test of time, and Victor points out the inferior quality of later modifications in roofs, paint cover and other general, pitiable changes made to these formerly remarkable structures. We imagine the villages as they once were, and copy his headshakes. 'That's how it is in this country.' Nieder Chortiza, he adds, was known to be the poorest of the villages in this area.





## SCHOENEBERG

Anticipation rises as we near Schoeneberg. We travel the length of the village before stopping the car for further exploring. Millie and Rudy clamber out, maps in hand. This is 'their' village.



We've already exclaimed properly over the 'Frank Isaak' house, its initials clearly visible on the gable. Everyone in the car has heard about this well-kept historic house, and for Millie it's the landmark that will point her toward the property where her Oma Sawatsky (Sarah Klassen) was born. The Hermann Klassens lived just to the left of the Isaaks. When Hermann passed away, Sarah and her new husband, Heinrich Sawatsky, stayed on and Heinrich and his brother managed the farm. But wait, what luck! There are people here. Victor's easy style wins them over in a moment, and they welcome our story, inviting us to take a look around and take as many pictures as we please. There is no telling, nor has there been documentation, whether the present house is an adaptation of the one that would have stood here all those years ago. Its wooden gable displays '1957'; is this the date of its 'restoration'? Upon closer inspection, Ed and Victor note the beams above the door frame, easily a hundred years old. Now we are gazing out over the fields that Opa would have plowed and the portion that, according to his memoirs, boasted a 'garden without equal'. Millie really doesn't want to leave. She exchanges addresses with the residents of her heritage.



Meanwhile, Rudy is strolling the roads and bridges that his own father walked as recently as 1940. There is the farm that housed the dairy cows that the young Cornie milked daily; there is the road that led to the school. Our maps indicate that another school stood on a property in the middle of the village. Together with Victor, a little old lady of the village confirms it. And together we find the old school yard.

We carry on to the cemetery where, according to Rudy Friesen's book, Hermann Klassen is buried. This will be as close as Millie will get to the remains of her own brand of 'relic'. We can't locate the stone. We thrash through bushes and Victor directs my gaze to a yawning hole in the earth. He dismisses it: Grave robbers. Oh NO! Not Great-Grandpa Hermann! We flay about some more and find one, tilting forward, hardly readable. Victor grabs his customary handful of green sumac and rubs its leaves across the engraving. One by one the letters appear. H-e-r-m-a-n-n Klassen!! 1840-1905. Incredible!







We carry on through Osterwick where Victor points out a remarkably well-preserved school, Schultz's factory and a formerly ostentatious home. By now we are getting good at recognizing these Mennonite houses with their two or three rounded windows set into peaked gables and precise brickwork. We entertain ourselves looking for the ones that have been altered almost beyond recognition. We pass through Kronstal and into Rosengart. This is Rudy's mom's town. We



spend considerable time in the school-yard, and inside the building itself, which is now a library. Once again, Victor relates our quest to the keepers of the key. Everyone is happy to show us around. We extend our gratitude through Victor, who catches himself replying to us in Ukrainian now and again! What a day! Rich, eventful and HOT!! Have I mentioned that the peak of the day is never less than 38 degrees?





## CHORTITZA

### Monday, July 30

After an excellent breakfast, replete with customary cold coffee, we pile into Victor's white Opel and head for Chortitza. Ed has convinced three of the party to pack swimming gear on the off chance of a dip in the Dnieper. We drive through Einlage first. In Chortitza, we note Koop's factory, but more fascinating is the foundation of a Ukrainian establishment filled with headstones, authenticating Victor's earlier stories, and explaining why there are no stones left in the cemetery here. This village, a thriving hub of activity in its day, housed some of the wealthiest Mennonite families. Victor points out Niebuhr's mills, one after the other.



We arrive at the famous old oak. Here is a sight. Its massive white limbs create an uncanny pattern against the blazing blue sky. There is one living branch. The cameras go crazy. We take turns draping ourselves in various arrangements against this remarkable tree, much like the earlier generation for whom it had been a popular backdrop. Since those days, an iron horse and other coarse mementos of Cossack life have arrived on the scene, erected in hopes of luring visitors to the restaurant that also popped up next to this majestic tourist attraction. As we retrace our way to the car, our curiosity is peaked by an orthodox-like edifice that towers above us at the entrance of the park, built directly upon a bridge. We hear a sardonic account of the history of this newish structure, erected by wealthy individuals seeking to demonstrate their piety and state their religious conviction (and perhaps assuage their guilt over the shady ways they got their wealth?). 'Never has

there been a service of any kind in this church,' declares Victor, adding, 'This church is built on the wrong foundation!' Victor is on a roll. He contributes the popular local joke of the criminally prosperous 'businessman' who attempts to display his piety with the purchase of a large golden cross to wear as an adornment. As the story goes, he directs the jeweler to sell him one "without the gymnast on it".



Passing by the impressive buildings that once belonged to Dyck's lumberyard, we arrive at the factory of Hildebrand and Priess, formerly a manufacturer of farm implements. Victor's well-chosen words of explanation fall on sympathetic ears and the gate is opened for us. We walk around on the very grounds that had been owned and operated by Ed's grandfather. The buildings look pretty much like the pictures we have been studying, except for altered roofs and windows. The massive door on the side of the main building is the original. We muse about the large house behind the factory. Could this have been the medical facility built for the workers, that Rudy Friesen mentions in his book? Victor chats at length with the guards; we ask to go inside the factory. We are allowed to peek in. What we have done without Victor?



The Zentralschule, where Ed's aunts and uncles will have attended, has been converted into a driver training facility. In its glory days, this property connected a number of educational institutions, including the 'Musterschule' devoted, according to Victor, to the early schooling of children belonging to factory employees and other indigenous locals before they could enter the main school. It also gave Mennonite teachers-in-training from the teacher seminar a block away a place to have a go at the profession. The Zentralschule was conducted in German, and Victor's grandfather was one of its highly esteemed instructors.



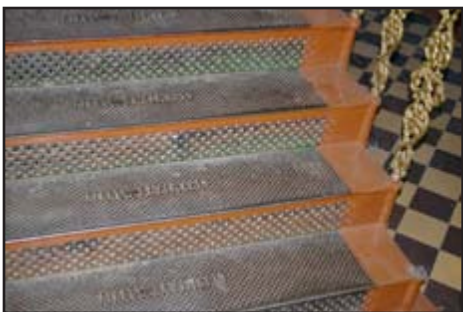
Victor is interrupted by an animated woman who, as it turns out, has been sent to request our audience with the director-boss of the place. Victor has another term for him, but we go. And we're treated to a lesson corroborating our guide's many 'anecdotes' of the incongruities of modern management. Dressed in fancy black, sporting exactly the right hair and beard befitting a man of his station, the boss pilots us through the rubble that barely glimmers of its former beauty. We pick our way over debris that we hear will be transformed within the year into a training school for beauticians, cooks, and other vocational categories. We sense each other's puzzlement, as there are only two workers to be seen in the whole place, and the one with the bandaged hand is leaning against his shovel in a huge room, ankle deep in tile shards. Our man in black



intones the marvel of the facility as it stands now, and shows us the four ancient blue trucks and the room where the instruction takes place. His pride in the condition of the original chimney tiles and windows is apparent, and as much as we can glean through translation, Victor is warmed by this. He tries to explain who we are, but the tour is over. We are officially thanked and sent on our way.



Next on the list is Chortitza's former "Maedchenschule". It stands as a better model of the past than the other, and we are taken with the Victorian elements of its architecture. Victor hastens to illuminate our curiosity with the suggestion that this may have been the upshot of competition with Chortitza's contemporaries in Molotschna, who demonstrated their wealth and prosperity at every wit and turn as-we-shall-see. A certain Frau Wallman here donated 10,000 rubles to the construction of this school. Nothing was too good for the education of the young ladies of Chortitza! Access to the inside is easy. Still in use as a school, the rooms seem authentic, matching our musings about how it 'used to be'. The original iron stair rail is beautifully crafted. Victor doesn't have to point out the obvious repair job. Further up the hill, we walk around on the grounds of a medical facility before arriving at Frau Wallman's 'Burg', as Victor calls it, adding that it sooner resembles a visual out of Brothers Grimm. There had been some early aspiration that this 'castle' could serve as a kindergarten... By now we're half-ready for lunch, but still, the question arises:



Victor, what would you choose to show us of interest in the area? Victor doesn't have to think long about this.

## NEUENDORF



The first is the cemetery that served the vast community surrounding Neuendorf. It is a large plain, and a very few stones remain. Some of them read '1868' and even earlier. There is no anchor symbol on these. Were they Prussian? The place looks like it could have been a battlefield. In a panoramic moment, Victor stops the car so we can see the Mennonite houses in their order, all exactly the same distance apart according to the 'desjatins' allotted to each farmer. As we scan the vista, we see cows being milked at mid-day.

## SCHOENHORST

The second is a zip through the former village of Schoenhorst. This comes as a surprise, and Millie is delighted. This is where her Opa Sawatsky was born and where he spent the first fourteen years of his life before moving to Schoeneberg.



Amazingly enough, the school still stands. The upper street of the village is noticeably nicer than the lower street. The grandparents of young Heinrich Sawatsky lived on the lower street, across from the new school. His memoirs reflect on times when his grandfather would take him to the building site and impress him by saying, "The school is being built for you."



But the real reason that we visit Schoenhorst is in hopes of finding "Fischchen" at home. Victor is not disappointed. 82 year-old Galena Stepano is an old friend, and has been a fount of information over the years. And now we are meeting this remarkable lady whose history includes moving into a Mennonite house after it was abandoned in 1943. She is pleased about our visit and shows us around. We go inside. The ceiling and the door frames are the original. The floor plan has likely been altered.



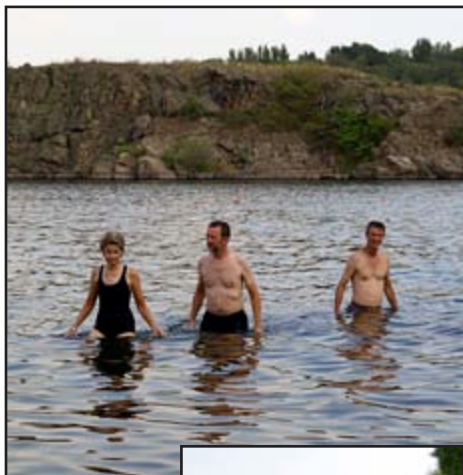
Outdoors, the parched garden bears out the lack of rain in the last 90 days. We are amazed by this energetic lady, who smiles easily and wants to know our names and then kisses us all in turn. Victor gets so caught up in his conversation that he starts speaking Ukrainian to us! He tells us that she still goes into town every day to sell the milk from her one cow. We forgot to ask about her nickname.

How did it get to be 2:30? Back in the car, lunch is further delayed by our search for the perfect picnic spot along the Dnieper River. This is hard won over the dustiest, bumpiest, hottest ride of our lives. However, once we're there, the bread, sausage, tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and variety of Ukrainian pop is declared the best meal Ed has ever had. It's followed by the swim of his dreams, in 'der schoene Dnieper'.





Back in Zapor-ezhye, the shower and the rest on a cool bed has its own sobering contrast to “what went before”, not only today, but years ago. Small wonder that Tante Liese never let us complain about anything!



The menu at the outdoor café offers no explanation, so once again we take our chances in the ‘Pectopah’ of our choice.

(see note below) With the usual moo-ing, baaing and crowing, our choices mostly work out according what we think we’ve ordered. Rudy adds the requisite french fries, having learned to recognize the Cyrillic letters of this dish in earlier ‘Pectopahs’.

Back at the hotel, we chase down ice cream bars with some of Sue’s local hot pepper vodka, bought earlier to stifle her cough. Come to think of it, we all have coughs, and it’s knocked back along with more of Rudy’s fantastic bedtime stories. What a day!! (“Pectopah”: The Ukrainian



word actually looks like this: ресторан. Rudy was the first to figure out that this says ‘restaurant’! Still, Pectopah ‘stuck’ and from Day 1, we took turns pointing out Pectopahs with appeal.) FYI, the Ukrainian P=R in English, E=E, C=S, T=T, O=O, A=A, and H=N. If you know this, then clearly, it says ‘Restoran’. Cool.



## FELSENBACH and SCHOENDORF

Tuesday, July 31



I declare that I am running out of words to describe this excursion! For one thing, I wish I could convey a better impression of the remarkable Victor. Today we arise to tackle the road to Borozenko Colony. We almost didn’t go, listening to the tongue-clucking and the head wagging about the condition of the roads. As it turns out, it was no hardship at all. Victor takes the better highway, and the two-hour drive flies by in the company of our host. This morning his topics of choice include Nestor Makhno, the Selbstschutz, the state of affairs today, how to buy a car, life as a young engineer in a Communist country, Ukraine’s growing pains... it’s rich just to sit and soak it all in. Before we know it, we are in Felsenbach. Felsenbach was the “dorf” where my mom’s dad, Isaac Tiessen was born, and where he and Catherine Funk spent

their honeymoon year before moving to Schoendorf. The modern name of this village is “Marinopol”, which solves the mystery of its reference in the Tiessen family book. Its one street is the usual 63 meters wide.



We arrive at the Froese mill. Victor speaks easily with the guard who explains that the mill has just fallen out of use, due to machinery parts no longer being available. No kidding. We take our leave while the guard muses that we don’t have anything better to do on such a hot day. The sole employer of the villagers nowadays is the large institution for people who require special services. Around here it is referred to as a ‘mental hospital’ or more commonly, an ‘orphanage’. Victor explains that the inhabitants have no families to care for them, and thus become wards of the state. We are led to believe that this ‘last resort’ is uncommon in this country.



Of course, a visit of the village automatically entails a trip to its cemetery. This drive is not unlike a ride in one of my brother’s cow pastures. No sooner have we drawn the analogy than we pass the cows and herdswomen, children in tow. There are two stones alone, left in this formerly massive graveyard, obviously too heavily anchored and too large for the taking. But more notable are the hundreds of crude wooden crosses marking the dates of Marinopol’s ‘orphans’. There are just as many unmarked mounds, a sad story. As we leave Felsenbach, we snap pictures of disintegrating Menno-nite houses along the main street.





Ed asks Victor to stop the car so he can admire two vintage motorcycles advertising archaic Soviet technology.



The road to Schoendorf is so pretty, flanked by trees and beautiful fields on either side. These roads were built by Mennonites, says Victor. I wonder if it's the same one that Grandpa took as he set out to visit the sweetest lady in the world, seemingly endless miles away. The road leads us to the loveliest village that we will see on our tour. The geese on the pond, the blue sky, the green meadows and the perfect stillness combine to form an idyllic scene, as I long for Grandma to have remembered it. I draw a map and take pictures of the once beautiful houses that run the length of the pond, thinking that research may uncover one of these having belonged to "us". One can only imagine the magnificent yards of yore, laden with fruit trees. Victor retells an earlier account of the termination of these gardens by the owners themselves, who were sooner inclined to cut all the trees down than to be subject to paying the harsh, new Soviet tax on fruit trees, harvesting them according to the Party timeline, then in the end handing over



most of the gain. How awful. In the cemetery we find five tombstones, only three of them readable. All are lying horizontally on the ground. Two are Loewen (Anna and David), and the other is "Anna Funk geb. Klassen 1841-1891". I promise myself I'll research that one when I get back.



So today, we actually have a picnic right in the cemetery, helping ourselves to one of the tables provided for Ukrainian families whose tradition is to follow the internment of their loved one with an on-site lunch. No going all the way back to the church for that! Victor points to the glass of vodka carefully placed at the foot of the headstone commemorating a jolly fellow. 'No wonder he smiles', he chortles. Most Ukrainian markers bear photos of their inhabitants. This cemetery also features a trapezoidal ceremonial structure, evidence of Communist times when only party officials were authorized to deliver funeral eulogies. Victor has more than one story of Mennonite mourners being trapped into listening to their beloved's significance to the cause, their indispensable presence in the factory, how the Party would never be the same... He tells us of a case where the orator got the gender wrong. I'm thinking this would give 'stony silence' a whole new meaning, not to speak of its effect on the grieving wife! "That's how it was, in this country," adds Victor.

Schoendorf came to be known as "Olgina". I remember this from studying the Tiessen family history, the name referring to my Aunt Lydia's birthplace. The village is now called 'Nova Sofia'. We drive back down the lovely road one more time,



just to enjoy the view. I'm sorry to leave. I remember catching Grandma in a wistful moment, smiling (as she always did) and saying, 'Das war die schoenste Zeit'. (That was the best of times.) I can't stop thinking about her.

There are few buildings left in Blumenhof which, as Victor is accustomed to saying, will be cancelled in a few years. He insists that we visit a cemetery in which we are shown a phenomenon unlike any he has seen. The marker is an iron cross bearing the symbols of anchor and cross combined. The lettering is old gothic German script and we read it easily: Arthur Fischer, 15 years old. Could this be the son of a Lutheran-Mennonite marriage? This would have been as singular as the marker itself. Through Heuboden, we pass a property where a former Mennonite schoolhouse has just met its demise, the good bricks having been sold for \$1200 U.S. The rest is rubble. Victor points out the "Lutheran construction" of these houses, so much like that of the Mennonites. The difference? Look at the windows! Massive long buildings in the fields indicate the bygone era of collectivization. The rows of old mulberry trees attest to another phenomenon of former 'glory' days – silkworm farming. It's as hot as it's been, and Victor stops the car to splash cold water all over his head. The ripe wheat in the fields is only a few inches high.

We're back in Zaporozhye by 4 o'clock, where the comforts of our hotel remind us of our luxurious lives compared to those long ago days. Millie is feeling the apron strings particularly keenly today, and she emails the events of the day to the farm.

By nightfall the air is a little cooler and we venture once again into the world of too many restaurants with unreadable menus. This time none of our dishes resembles what we think we have ordered and the wine is not worth the game of charades it cost us to convince our bamboozled waitress that it was NOT the sweet wine we were after. Some Mennonites wouldn't have this problem.



## MOLOTSCHNA

Wednesday, August 1

Some folk come to the Ukraine for the sole purpose of the Molotschna excursion. We gave it a day. We travel first through the former Schoenwiese, now part of Zaporozhye, where we are shown another one of the Niebuhr mills, this one ostensibly having been the biggest in Europe. It made it into the history books due to its advanced technology, learned by a timely visit to the states by its founder. Along with the others, Niebuhr lost everything in the October revolt. En route to Molotschna, we are privy to more of Victor's stories and insight. Regarding Schoenfeld, where Ed's mother was born: We won't get there, due to its distance, but much is still to be unearthed about the Mennonite history there. It is not "finished". Information stored in museums and archives rarely distinguishes between Lutherans and Mennonites; they are simply listed as 'Germans'. All local centres have records, and Victor tells us that efforts to access them are generally blocked or dismissed with 'Why do they want to know this?' or 'It is not important!' He includes the story of Arthur Kroeger, who traveled from Canada to visit, among other things, the museum where his father's clocks are displayed. It just so happened to be 'Museum Day' in the Ukraine. Perfect? Nyet. On Museum Day in the Ukraine, all museums are closed. This was the last straw for Victor. 'The man whose face is on your walls is now standing here and you cannot let him in!' he claims to have raged at the guard. They got in. Apparently in Zaporozhye's museum, there is a room allocated to the German population that once lived there. It holds a Schlafbank, a few clocks and some pictures. 'That's how it is... in this country.' "Molotschna" means "milky". The river has this appearance because of the fine silt in its water. As we drive along its banks, Victor describes Stalin's proposal to implement a water project that would have ultimately flooded the region. Fortunately, he died before his cockamamie scheme could be realized. In places, the formerly mighty Molotschna is reduced to a trickle, evidence of the erosion caused by yet another ill-conceived Soviet order to plough and farm its banks.



The town of Halbstadt is hardly 'halb'. Victor has already primed us for the flavour of this area, compared to Chortitza. Wealth abounded here, as evidenced in the Willms estate. His mill was once the tallest building in the region.



It seems this fellow Willms had no second thoughts about parading his money, we note while we tour a crumbling mansion unlike any Mennonite residence we gave seen on this trip. Rather, we risk our limbs climbing into badly vandalized spaces, including a huge ex-theatre or ballroom or something! What an estate this must have been.



On the way to Petershagen, we pass an old silk factory and fields of mulberry bushes. In this town we visit a church, the renovation of which surely created quite a to-do when it was undertaken. You can find the whole story on page 346 of Rudy Friesen's book, 'Into the Past'. The plaque on



the church reveals the perpetual spelling challenge of our heritage title: 'Menon-nite'. This site figured strongly in recent bicentennial celebrations by people connected to this area.

Back in Halbstadt, we visit the Maedchenschule, now a centre for Mennonite studies. The prosperity and the affluence of these families resonates as we study the photos.



In Lindenau, Ed recounts a story told to him by his mom. It was 1921, her mother had passed away, and father loaded up the kids and his meager possessions to travel from distant Tiegerweide to this village to marry his second wife, Katarina Isaak. How did they get there? By cow and wagon. It's all he had left after the 'redistribution' of all private goods. Further along in Lichtenau, we stop at the train station, still functional, from which hundreds of area Mennonites left in 1925, including Ed's mom's family. This raises solemn imaginings.



Ohrloff is next. Victor refers to it as a miserable village, nothing like its heyday when it boasted a bookstore! We snap seven locals waiting for the milk truck that will pay them 1 Hryvnia (about 20 cents Canadian) per liter of milk. They have 6 pails among them and all the time in the world.





We stop for one more cemetery picnic, alongside Heinrich Heinrich Reimer. Soon we are in Tiegerweide. Ed's mom's family moved here from Schoenfeld. We find the school that had been converted for use by a collective farm and dismantled last year.

From there, Ed paces off 100 meters (2x50 as per lot), to locate the Peter Wiens property where his mom had lived.

Well, by now we are checking our watches. Our train leaves at 8:30 and Zaporozhye is way down the map. We zip through Rueckenau, Fuerstenwerder, Alexanderwohl, Fuerstenau, and arrive in Schoensee. Here we stop and indulge in our last photo sessions in this 'land'. Sue's great grandmother lived here; she tells us that few details about that time remain in the possession of her family.

Now we are zapping back to Zaporozhye. Victor Andretti at the wheel gets us back in record time. In a bid to thank him further for this extraordinary expedition, we insist on taking him out for supper. His choice? The Potato House. We chew over our last four days. "Thank you" seems so — mundane. Victor will forever be one of our favourite people. This will count among my favourite travels.

That's how it was.



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