

TRACING OUR ROOTS

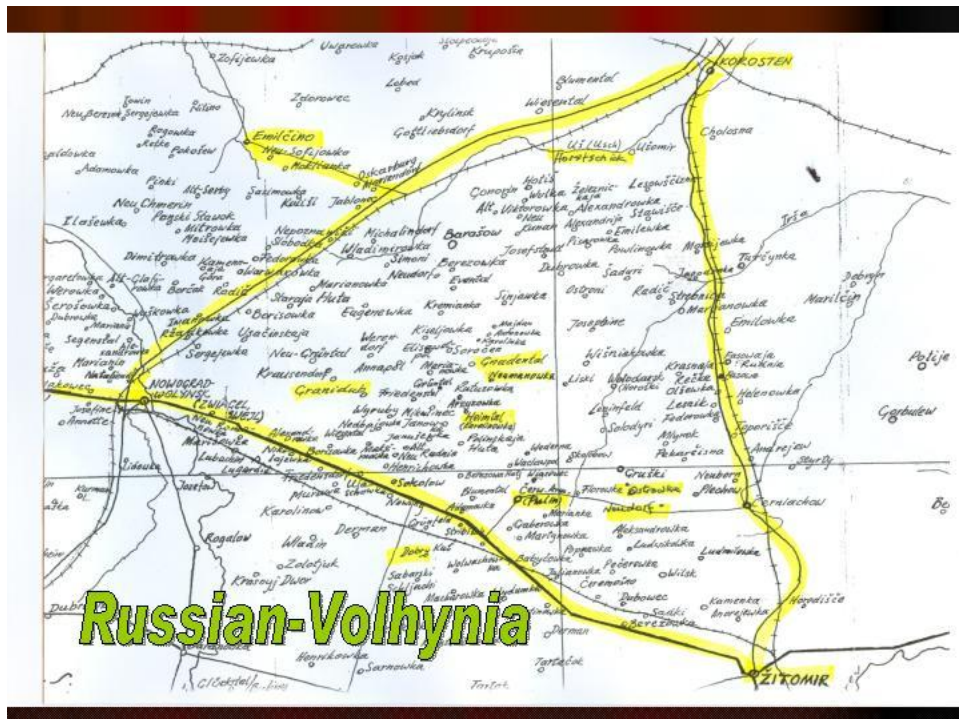
Volhynian Village Adventure Tour

May 12-26, 2008

*I am happy to report that we had another wonderfully successful **Volhynian Village Adventure Tour**. Because of our limited group size and restricted area of coverage (roughly from Zhitomir to Rovno), we had ample time to visit all the desired villages in a leisurely fashion. In addition, we spent a day sightseeing in Kiev, several days in the State Archives in Zhitomir, and plenty of time interacting with villagers and visiting other historical sites of interest. We also took a cruise down the Dneiper River and enjoyed a lovely farewell dinner. I am indebted to Adolph Sonnenburg and Shelly Popke for much of the material in this article. **Donald N. Miller**, Tour Leader*

VILLAGE DISCOVERIES

Our tour began in **Emiltschin**, the regional trade center for Neu Sofiewka, Glen Auchtung's village. As was our custom when entering an area, we went first to the village administrator to get our bearings and to determine if there was anything left of the villages we were looking for. We were surprised at how knowledgeable the village administrator was. He knew all about the Germans – when they first arrived and where they settled. “The German colonists initially lived on the high ground,” he said. “But it wasn’t long before they drained the swamps.” He then added, “The Poles got the best land, but the Germans developed it.” He said that during the collectivization process 40 villages literally disappeared from the map. Neu Sofiewka was one of them. He also said that the repression of the 1930s was especially intense in Emiltschin, because it was near the border of Poland and Belarus, where many people tried to make their escape.



Auchtung said, “I did not expect my visit to Emiltschin to result in any additional information. I just wanted to feel my family’s presence by visiting the village. My visit to the area, however, turned out to be the highlight of my trip. In an interview for a magazine in the 50’s, Theodore’s brother, Leonard, my great-uncle, stated that my great-grandfather “was the principal man on a certain sheep and cattle ranch, caring for the interests of a Mr. Salgavich, one of Russia’s wealthiest citizens and a friend of the Tsar”. Leonard indicated that the ranch was about 12 km from Emiltschin. It wasn’t much to go on, especially since he was recalling events from 50 years earlier when he was a teenager.

“But when we stopped at the regional administration office building,” Auchtung continued, “I was encouraged to learn that a Polish Count by the name of Uvarov, was given a large tract of land by the Tsar around 1812. There was also a large land owner and friend of the Tzar who lived in the area. From my research on the Internet I had learned that his name was Aleksey Sergeyevich Uvarov, son of Count Uvarov. Since Sergeyevich sounds very much like Salgavich, this may very well be the Salgavich my family spoke of. It’s an intriguing thought and pleasant surprise.



“But again,” Auchtung said, “it was not the end of my surprise. For when we came to **Makliaki**, near Neu Sofiewka and rounded the corner, just past the school, I was pleasantly surprised to see an old massive German mill silhouetted against the sky at the top of the hill. It was 30 meters high and absolutely breathtaking! The mill seemed to be pretty much in tact, except for the blades that were missing. Even the grindstones were still there. Since my grandfather lived in nearby **Sofiewka**, it is almost certain that he used the mill to grind his wheat. Locals told us that the mill was used until about 1975. Tears came to my eyes as I realized that I was standing on the same ground that my ancestors walked on many years ago. What an experience! There was also a cemetery nearby, but there were no stones to be found.

Baptist Church in Neudorf, (Russian-Volhynia)



- Built in 1906
- First Pastor – Eugen Mohr
- Gisela Taber, grand-daughter of first Pastor – Eugen Mohr
- Church renovated in 1991
- Congregation 140 yrs. Old
- 100 anniversary - 2006

The following day we visited the big red brick church in **Neudorf**, which served as the “mother church” for the German Baptists in the entire Zhitomir region. The church was built in 1905-1907 during the time that Eugen Mohr served as pastor. The visit to the church was of special significance to Gisela Taber, as Mohr was her grand father. The following Sunday morning when Gisela, a retired Methodist pastor, stood behind the pulpit and addressed the congregation, she felt as though she was standing on holy ground. It was a very unique experience for her.

Our next village was **Ostrowka**, the ancestral village of David Neumann. This was once a rather large village, but it was wiped out during the collectivization period. The only remaining house was that owned by the Stahl family, which was used by the foreman of the collective farm system in the 1930s. The large two-story house was partially destroyed by fire in 1967. It was rebuilt and is now owned by Peter Kozachenko, a farmer and Baptist pastor. Kozachenko said that during the 1930s over 400 German colonists from Ostrowka were shot. The rest were sent to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Harry Stahl was among them.

According to Neumann, “One of the Stahls married a Neumann, and that couple, Edward and Lydia Stahl (nee Neumann) emigrated to Canada in 1927 and settled in southern Saskatchewan. Lydia was my father’s first cousin.”

When Neumann told Kozachenko who he was and why he was there, he retrieved a 1927 picture of the Stahl family. In the center of the photo stood a newly married couple, Edward Stahl and Lydia Neumann. The picture was taken just before they left for Canada. Neumann reports that later during his stopover in Germany, he got a map from Harry Stahl (who had immigrated to Germany in 1995), showing exactly where the

Neumann farm had been in Ostrowka. “It was only 1.4 km from the Stahl homestead. That’s how close we had come to our ancestral land,” Neumann said.



From Ostrowka we drove to nearby **Miajdan**, where there are only a couple of houses remaining. One of them is occupied by Meta Neumann (8), a German and possible distant relative of Neumann.

The following day we made our way down south to **Karlswalde**, near Ostrog, where the Sonnenburg family once lived. Before Adolph Sonnenburg left to go on the tour, a friend discouraged him from going. He said disdainfully, “Why are you going there?” There’s nothing left!” Sonnenburg’s significant finds proved his friend otherwise. Adolph was overwhelmed with what he saw and found.

Writing about the experience, he said, “My personal high point of the tour was visiting the villages of Karlswalde and Grünthal, the birth places of my parents, Adolf and Leontina (Ulmer) Sonnenburg. Karlswalde is approximately a two-hour drive from Zhitomir. The village has been renamed Prikerdonne, which means “close to the border.” We stopped and chatted with several current residents of the village, but they were all too young to remember the ethnic Germans who had lived there, since the Soviet regime deported all remaining Germans from Karlswalde in 1935.

We walked down the main street and visited the site of the former school, now a vacant lot filled with rubble. Across the street was the site of the Evangelical Lutheran Church with a huge tree in front. The church was demolished in the 1950s. Some century old German built homes are still standing in the village, now occupied by Ukrainians. Part of the village of Karlswalde, beyond the creek (Ritschke), had been demolished and made into collective farmland. We walked across the creek and my great-niece Shelley Popke-Russell and I stood together on the vacant land where my mother Leontina (Ulmer) Sonnenburg was born. I glanced up the road towards Jadwonin and was overcome with emotion. I thought about my grandparents, Jakob and Katharina Ulmer, and how they built and developed their 41-acre farm from scratch. They worked diligently to care for

their eleven-member family. They were arrested and deported like criminals. Their farm buildings were demolished and their property was turned into collective farmland.



“We asked several villagers about the location of the German cemetery and were told that it had been plowed under. However, they also told us that we should look for a large wooden cross at the edge of the village and that we would find a few remaining German gravestones there. We walked over to the 12-foot high wooden cross, held up by four gravestones at its base. I was astonished to see the gravestone of my great-grandfather, Johann Ulmer, who was born in 1844 and died in 1917. This was our great-grandfather, the pioneer who settled in Karlswalde in 1874. The other gravestones were of Michael Krause, Katharina Wilhelm (1870-1915) and Anna Hinz (1832-1889), all of which connect to the Ulmer family. What a significant discovery! We had a minute of silence and prayer in memory of the deceased before continuing to our next destination.”

While enroute to **Grünthal**, formerly in Russian Volhynia and the birthplace of the Sonnenburg and Krebs families, we stopped at a neighboring village and met a Ukrainian lady who knew the history of the area. She recalled the names of several former German villagers, including Schultz and Krebs. You can imagine the delight on Magda Kemp’s face when the name *Krebs* was mentioned, as her great grand father was a Krebs. The lady went on to tell us that she had a table and bench made by Krebs in her house, which she purchased from some Germans “You are welcome to see it,” she said, before we even had a chance to ask. “I can take you to my house.” And with that she was off on her bicycle with us in close toe to see this century-old table made of solid wood. It was quite a thrill for Magda to sit on the bench at the table, which her great grandfather, a

carpenter, had fashioned with his very own hands. Later, we marveled at the odds of making such a discovery.



According to Sonnenburg, “The Ukrainian lady then escorted us to the former Russian-Polish border of 1921. We stood on the border where in August 1931 my parents, Adolf and Leontina Sonnenburg, several other members of the Sonnenburg family and about 30 other people made a daring escape to Poland. That border crossing was fatal to two escapees and my brother, Emil, who at the age of three and a half was shot in the arm by a border guard. My family escaped only with what they had on their backs. Their home, farm, livestock and possessions were all left behind. My thoughts went back seventy-seven years to how my parents realized that there was no future for them under the communist system. Thank God. From a distance we could see where the former German village of Grünthal was located, the houses were now all long gone. Nevertheless, visiting this area brought the rich history of the German colonists in Volhynia and the stories of our ancestors alive for us all.”

On our way to the village of Kurasch, we passed through **Sadke** where Sonnenburg was born and where, together with Adolf Hill and Elsie Gracher, he attended school. A Ukrainian lady, who accompanied us in the village, pointed in the direction where the school once stood. “That’s where the school was,” she said.

“Driving along the stone paved road was like driving on a washboard, making it impossible to take pictures of the beautiful countryside along the way.” In their combined report, Sonnenburg and Popke wrote. “The German colony of **Kurasch** no longer exists. It was demolished after its German inhabitants were resettled to Warthegau in Occupied

Poland in January 1940. The village administrator from Sadki escorted our tour group to a farm formerly owned by some Germans. The 80-year old Ukrainian lady that lived there recalled that the former owner of her house was named *Adolf Hill*. With that, Adolf Hill said, "I'm a Hill and that was my uncle, Adolf Hill. He lived here and owned this property." The lady was shocked. She had not expected to meet a German relative of the previous owner of her house. After talking with her and her two sons for about 45 minutes, it was time to depart. Some tour members gave her gifts and money. The generosity was overwhelming for her and she started crying, wishing everybody, "Good health, long and eternal life."

"Two days later, after spending the day in the archives Rovno, we returned to Kurasch in an attempt to locate of the former German cemetery in Kurasch. Along the way we met two Ukrainian men and about a half dozen teenagers. After talking with them about the village, they told us that the cemetery was still in existence. They offered to escort us to the cemetery, which was approximately a half hour walk across a muddy field. It was late in the evening, but we did not hesitate to accept their offer. By the time we reached the cemetery it was dusk and we only had a little flashlight to light our way. The cemetery had not been used for seventy years and it was overgrown with trees and brush. We all walked through the dense bush and came out on the other end without finding a single gravestone. After taking a group photo, our young guides said, "We are going back in again." They were positive that there were still some German gravestones buried in the thick brush somewhere. Within a few minutes we heard a cry, "Here. Come here, we found one." We all dashed back into the bush and, sure enough, they had found a gravestone. It was that of Samuel Krebs, a distant relative. He was born in 1916 and died in 1937. Adolf Hill remembered him as a brilliant, musically-inclined person, who was director of the Church of God choir in Kurasch. He also remembered that Samuel had died of blood poisoning. It was another significant discover."

During the tour we also had the opportunity to visit **Aleksandrija** (Rovno region), in former Polish-Volhynia, which was of special interest to Herman Kemp. Aleksandrija was the administration office for the surrounding villages, including Puchawa and Pawlowka. We paid a visit to the administrator of the community, as was our custom upon entering a village. He was astounded to meet former residents of the area. During a half hour discussion he described how difficult it was for him to introduce free enterprise to his community, as most people still think in the old Soviet way. The administrator graciously escorted the tour group to Puchawa, birthplace of Lydia (Krause) Kemp, Herman Kemp's mother.



Our next destination was **Pawlowka**, the birthplace of Herman Kemp. It was quite a challenge to find the village. We asked for directions at a variety store and a Ukrainian lady volunteered to escort our group to the area. The dirt road was not passable with our van, so we set out on foot through heavy forest. Beyond the bush our escort pointed in the direction of the former village Pawlowka, which had been demolished and turned into collective farmland. It was impossible to go much further.

On the way to Zelanka over the rough cobblestone road, we visited **Tutschin**, where the well-known Hugo Schmidt, served as pastor of the well-known German Lutheran church there. The large church building, still standing, is now a TB hospital. The educational wing of the church built in 1892, is also still intact and in use.



Sonnenburg and Popke continued, “We traveled through some gorgeous countryside to our next destination, **Zelanka**, birthplace of Magda (Jeske) Kemp. In Zelanka we met Vasily Ozarchuk, a vigorous old man of 80, who remembered the Jeske family. They were delighted to meet Magda, daughter of Gottlieb and Amalie Jeske, who was three years old when the family was resettled to Occupied Poland. The buildings that had been on the Jeske farm were long since gone, but their former property bordered that of the Ukrainian couple. The highlight of the visit occurred when the couple led the way to the little lake where Magda’s father fished and that had once been used by the Church of God for baptisms. It was a very emotional moment as Magda stood on the land where her cradle once hung. The couple then invited the entire tour group into their home and proudly showed us their well-maintained facilities.”



While in Zelanka, we had also hoped to go **Amelin**, which is only three km from Zelanka., as Adolf Hill was baptized here. But the area, once the main base of the German Church of God where numerous annual church conventions were held, is now a

military army base. A large sign posted at the entrance reads that it is forbidden to enter the area “upon threat of death.” The roads are nothing more than tractor trails today.

We also visited **Granidub** (i.e. “big oak”). We were told that the oak that once stood at the entrance of the village was so large that a horse could turn around on it. An old man remembered the names: Deich, Bettinger, Reihl and Neuman. When David Neumann heard the name *Neumann* come out of the old man’s mouth, he pressed him for more information. But the old man only shook his head and said, “You’ll have to ask someone older. I’m only 80.” We all had a good laugh.

On the last day of our villaging we made our way to **Horstschick**, where the first German Baptist Church in Volhynia was founded in 1864. It is believed that Glenn Auchtung’s great grandparents were married in the church and that some family members may even have been founding members of the church. Auchtung hoped to at least find a gravestone with the Auchtung name on it. But no such luck. “Almost all of the tombstones,” Auchtung said, “were gone and the few remaining ones were illegible. But I did experience the thrill of walking where my family walked and I did see the old church building.”

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

After a brief stop in Wasielewski, we visited **Dobysch**, which was a Polish National District until 1935 and the ancestral home of Michael Wasielewski and Anita Taylor, brother and sister, from the UK. Our first stop was the bakery where the Michael and Anita’s second cousin works. It was a stop that all of us had been waiting for as we were eager to meet various members of the Wasielewski clan.

Michael and Anita knew they had at least one cousin, Zophiya, living in Dobysch, but they had no idea how many relatives they would meet before the trip was over. It all began with their father, Franz Wasielewski, who was born in nearby Lubarska in 1922. In 1941, he was drafted by the German Army to work in Austria. After the war he made his way to England where he remarried. He never returned to Ukraine or had any further contact with his wife and children, which were left behind. He seldom talked about his shadowy past and expressly told Michael and Anita never to go with a name like *Wasilewski*.



When Franz died in 1999, Michael decided to dig into his past, beginning with his father. He hired a genealogical research company in Kiev and soon discovered that not only did he have a cousin in Ukraine, but he actually had six cousins there. Then he learned he had a half-sister (born out of wedlock) in Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, and that her mother, whom Franz never married, was living deep in the interior of Russia somewhere. She was the woman he had left behind. Imagine Michael and Anita's surprise, when they arrived in the Borispol airport in Kiev to be met by a whole host of relatives they never knew they had, not only from nearby Dobysch, but also from faraway Kazakhstan. They had all gathered to be present for the occasion. But the surprise didn't end there. A few days later, Galina and her mother also arrived, traveling many days and nights by train to join the family. It was a reunion of all reunions of a family Michael and Anita didn't know they had. "There were tears of joy as we all held each other," Michael said. In the course of their many other family gatherings, Michael and Anita learned they have even more relatives in Moscow and Belarus.

"Later, on my birthday," Michael continued, "Zophiya took us to **Lubarska Huta**. There we met a cousin who took us further into the forest, down narrow rutted tracks, where she showed us her cottage and the empty field next to it where my father's house once stood. The last day a relative brought out a photo album and in it was a picture of a little shack in the woods where my father had once lived. While living in the UK, far from home, he had painted this very same shack as the one single reminder of his past. Suddenly, it all came together. It was almost more than Anita and I could bear."

ARCHIVAL FINDINGS

There have been times when we have made significant archival findings than on this tour. This time they were only modest. David Neumann reported, “In the Zhitomir archives I found a document recording a sale and transfer of land from Christian Neumann (my great grandfather) to his son, Julius Neumann, the father of Lidia.”

I (Don Miller) was fortunate to find some information on Ernest Fritz, pastor of the German Baptist Church in Cholosna. For years I had been looking for his village of origin, churches he had served and other information. I had about given up when I came across his clergy *registration card* in the archives on this trip. It was dated January 1 – December 28, 1926. There I found what I had been looking for.



Some members of our group also spent a day in the archives in Rovno. Here Hermann Kemp found a record of his mother's birth. Otherwise, there was little success. The archives in Rovno is not nearly as organized as the archives in Zhitomir and the staff is not as knowledgeable or helpful. Also, since most of the records are in Polish, it makes it more difficult for the average person to retrieve much information.

TOUR MEMBERS

Glenn Auchtung, Fort Wayne, IN., Elsie Gracher, Edmonton, AB., Adolf Hill, Edmonton, AB., Herman and Magda Kemp, Edmonton, AB.; David and Elfrieda Neumann, Brantford, ONT., Shelley Popke, Denver, CO., Adolph Sonnenburg, Kitchener, ONT., Giesla Taber, Sequim, WA., Anita Taylor, Bedfordshire, UK., Michael Wasilewsk, Hertfordshire, UK.



Sonnenburg, in summing up the tour experiences, wrote, “Our two-week *Volhynian Village Adventure Tour*, led by Don Miller, was an unforgettable experience. It enriched our knowledge of the country and the history of our ancestors. We not only enjoyed touring the villages of our forefathers, but also those of the other tour members. We met many wonderful Ukrainian people along the way who welcomed us and generously shared their time and knowledge of the German colonists in Volhynia with us. We enjoyed riding in a comfortable 17-seater VW *Sprinter* van manned by Igor and ate heartily in various Ukrainian restaurants. Alex Brzhezitskyy, national director of *Samaritan Ministries in Ukraine*, served as our able translator and on-location guide. We will cherish the memories from this trip and the relationships that we developed while searching for our Volhynian roots together.”