

# GERHARD ♦ A Promise of Freedom & Vanquished Hope

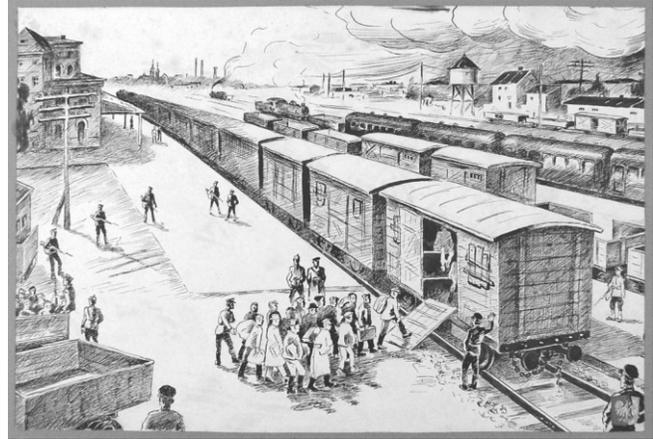
Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

## *A Promise of Freedom & Vanquished Hope*

On October 1, 1948, the other German workers and I received an order not to return to work. We were told that we would receive our freedom. Since we were Germans, we could not return to Ukraine, but would instead go to Uzbekistan, which had a warmer climate. Twenty-five of us Russian-Germans packed our few things and left our barracks, thinking we were now free men. To our great disappointment, a police contingent met us at the gates. One of our men asked, "Where is our freedom?" "You are criminals," the police told us, "and you might commit more crime. We cannot let you just walk away unaccompanied." They ordered us into a truck, and under guard, brought us to the train station. We were ordered into a rail wagon, a guard was posted, and the door was locked. This was our freedom!

The next day the train headed into unfamiliar territory. After a day we arrived at the Volga. A train of about 20 wagons was assembled, men, women, and children of all ages who were being banished, some for not fulfilling their quota of work days in a kolhoz. Our wagon was coupled to this train, and after several days we arrived at Omsk. The entire group were ordered out of the cars and marched through the city under heavy guard to the delousing center. The citizens of Omsk thought this humiliation of even the children was an outrage. They shouted at the guards, but the people were quickly disbursed.

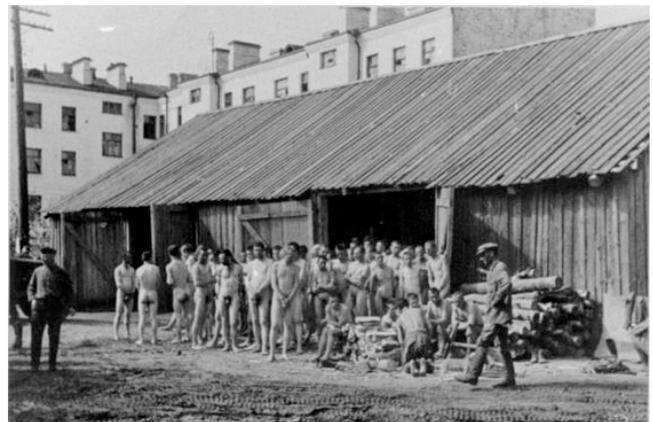
When we arrived at the delousing center, the women and children undressed and delivered their clothes for delousing, then were ordered into public showers. When the guards thought that they was taking too long, they ordered the men to undress also, deliver their clothes, and join the women. All these men, women, young men, young girls and children had to stand bare-naked together for four hours until our clothes were returned. It was a great humiliation for all of us. Then we were marched again back to our train, the car doors were locked, and the journey continued. We asked the guard several times where we were being taken. In answer each time he sang a little Russian ditty, which says, "Kolyma has 11 months of winter and one month of summer." We perceived it would be a cold place. It turned out they were taking us to Siberia.



The prisoners were promised freedom, then herded by the NKVD onto cattle cars for a month-long journey to Siberia. Their "freedom" was actually exile into the far north.



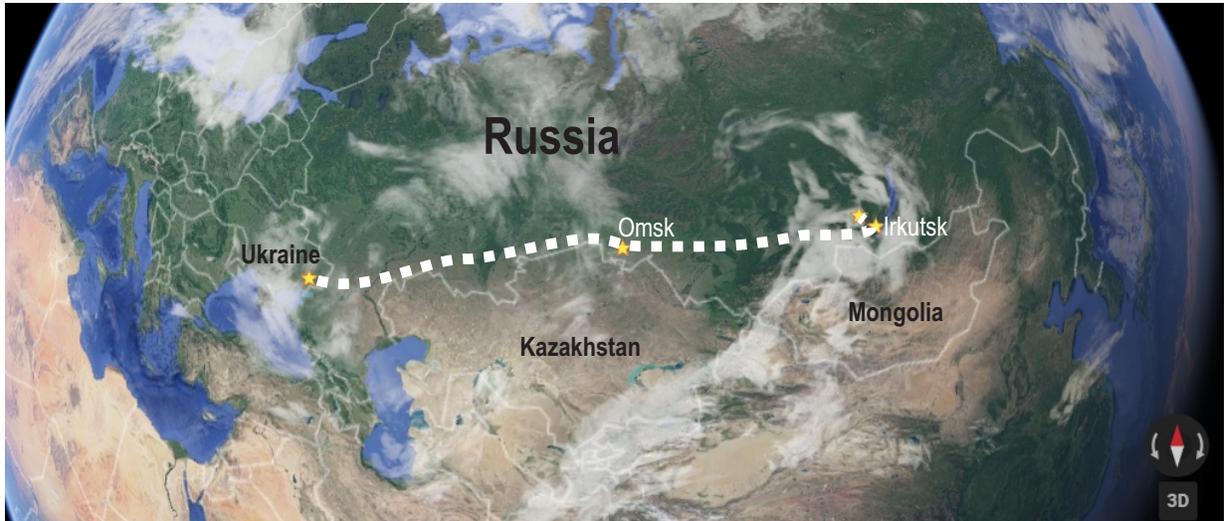
Prisoners being deloused at a center.



Guards required the prisoners to strip and stand publicly naked for four hours during delousing until their clothes were returned. Men, women and children stood naked together as a form of public humiliation. The Russian citizens of Omsk were outraged, and protested on their behalf until the guards sent them away.

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Gerhard was sent a huge distance away from his home in Ukraine for his exile in Siberia.

In 1948, Gerhard was exiled to the Irkutsk region in Central Siberia. It had been settled by prisoners and exiles and developed by forced labor.

As an exile, Gerhard may have worked on the fringes of one of the region's Gulag camps. Some exile villages were near major urban centers, and others were remote.

There were some notable camps and settlements in the vicinity of where he was sent, approximately 700 km north of Irkutsk. Ust-Kut was where Leon Trotsky had been sent as a political exile in 1900. Ust-limst was

notorious for its terrible conditions; tens of thousands of prisoners died there during the 1930s. Bratsk's 44,000 prisoners constructed a railroad from Tayshet to Ust-Kut in 1937, a project so deadly it was said that there was a dead man under every railroad tie. And Tayshet was the administrative center of the region, the center of a large camp system. Within Tayshet was Ozerlag, a MVD (secret police) special camp where in 1948 a large number of Japanese and German POWs were sent to work out their 25-year sentences.



# GERHARD ♦ Banished to Siberia

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



**After a month in a cattle car, prisoners were brought to the woods in Siberia in November, dropped off and abandoned without any provisions. “Live well, now you are free,” the guards shouted as they drove off.** “We were all dressed in light clothing, and winter had settled in already,” Gerhard remembers. The abandonment of new recruits in the wilderness was a common practice; it weeded out the weak right away. None in Gerhard’s party died, but in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes an incident in which 150 men all froze to death.



**After three days, a limousine arrived with officials who bartered for the prisoners.** Gerhard and ten other German men were assigned to the gold industry, and transported in the back of a truck 700 miles north to the gold mining area of Alta in Irkutsk (below). Their driver outfitted them for the cold first.



## *Banished to Siberia*

The journey took over a month. Our journey had begun on October 1, and we arrived at a little station called Boyshojneva on November 10. We were loaded into trucks and driven 20 kilometers into the forest. Then the guards ordered us to get out of the trucks into the wild forest. Our guards shouted as they turned their vehicles around, “Live well. Now you are free.” And they left us alone.

What a freedom! We were all dressed in light clothing, and deep winter had settled in already. Surrounding us were only trees, forest, and snow. Not a building in sight! What were we to do? We made a fire to keep warm. Whoever had brought a little food ate what he had. We especially tried to keep the children close to the fire to keep them from freezing. We all survived the first three days.

The third day a limousine arrived with an official looking delegation, dressed in furs, who turned to us with a lively greeting, “How goes it? Who is still alive?” Amazingly we all were! They taunted, “So, you know how to stay alive.” Now began the barter of who would take whom. The man representing the gold industry announced, “I am taking the 25 German men. I need strong young men.” And so we were assigned to the gold industry. The man was very influential because the state needed gold. He said he would supply us with warm clothes, and send us north. The next day he brought us felt boots, quilted pants, warm jackets, fur caps, warm gloves and gave us 100 rubles with which to buy our dinner. Ten of us were taken by truck 700 kilometers further north to the central gold region of Alta in Irkutsk. He kept the rest of our group of Russian Germans at the rail station.

Our driver was a good man who had fought in Germany during the war and knew German. He said to us, “The trip will take several days and will be very cold. I will drive so that you will all survive. When you are too cold, knock on the window and I will stop and make a fire so you can warm yourselves.” The first day we drove 110 kilometers until we came to a town with a canteen where we could buy some dinner. It was the first food we had eaten in three days.

The 700-kilometer journey took three days over mountainous and rough roads. We arrived at our des-

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mination at 10 o'clock in the evening of November 14th. Before we entered the town, the driver stopped at the top of a hill and said to us, "Men, look at the place where I have brought you. This is your new home. This is where you have been banished for life." I looked around me. All I saw in every direction was snow, hills and frost; frost, snow and hills...nothing

more. The cold was so deep, that the trees cracked. At 11 o'clock we arrived at a barrack which was also a shelter for the drivers who came to this area. In the barracks were no beds and no blankets or pillows, only wood slats on which we lay in all the clothes we had. Our new life in our new homeland had begun.

“ This is your new home.  
This is where you have been  
banished for life.”  
I looked around me.  
All I saw in every direction was  
snow, hills and frost;  
frost, snow and hills...nothing more.  
The cold was so deep  
that the trees cracked.



Gerhard and the other men were banished to Siberia for life.

# GERHARD ♦ Exiled in the Far North

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



Living conditions in Siberia were primitive. Men lived in barracks, which they shared with ten other men.



Beds were on slat boards, and the men had no pillows or blankets, so to keep warm, they slept in every piece of clothing they owned. A wood stove stood in the middle of the barracks.



"This was indeed a heavy sentence," remarked Gerhard. The exiled were confined to a restricted area, and had to stay within three miles of the town limits. If they were found outside this area, they would be sentenced *without trial* to 25 years in a prison.

## *Exiled in the Far North*

The next day was Sunday, which was bath day for men. It was wonderful to lie in the sauna and get rid of all the dirt we had carried so long. We returned from the bath as new-born men. Our new home was bare. The beds were wood slats. There were no straw mattresses, no blankets, and no pillows. We lay down to sleep in the same clothes in which we worked. Deep winter had settled in already in November with temperatures at minus 40 degrees centigrade and dropping lower each day. The natives had adjusted to this cold but we new arrivals nearly perished. We did not have the proper clothing for this region, and were unaccustomed to such severe cold. In the middle of the barrack stood a large iron stove, which we kept running day and night. It afforded us the luxury of always having hot water for tea whenever we wished.

The following Monday we reported to our new commanding officer. He asked about our circumstances and why we had been sent to this region. He had been told that the new arrivals were banished to the region for life. He spelled out the terms of our exile: we were confined to a restricted area, and had to stay within three miles of the town limits. If we were found outside this area, we would be treated as fugitives, and be sentenced without trial to 25 years in a penal institution. Twice a month we had to report to him, and sign papers that indicated our whereabouts. We now had to adjust to this new development. This was indeed a heavy sentence. We realized that the



# German Camaraderie in Exile ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

commandant was only a pawn of the government and it was his duty to see that the orders which had come from above were carried out. We held no animosity towards him.

The day after we arrived, I sent a telegram to my wife who was living with her parents in Odessa at the time. Because she was Ukrainian, she had returned from Germany after the war, and was a free person. Had she been German, she would have been banished as I was. Two months later I received a letter from her, telling me that our son, who was now five, had died from meningitis. She said she could not come to me at this time because it was winter, and our daughter was in school. This was bad news for me.

For several years, she promised me that she would come join me, but there was always some reason why she couldn't come just yet. During the winter, our daughter was in school, and each summer she was prevented from coming for a different reason. Finally, my wife's sister wrote to me and told me that my wife had been living with another man for five years and had a child by him. I had sent her money regularly, and she had used that to support her extended family which now numbered eight: herself, her two children, her two parents, and the man's two daughters by a previous marriage. This was crushing news for me.

I again had to adjust to a new and unwelcome development in my life. I was without wife and family again. The women who lived in this region were very prejudiced against the Germans, as the Russian propaganda machine had done a thorough work of in-breeding a deep hatred for everything German. A Russian officer stationed at one of the prisons had recently died, and his widow had also been a teacher. I entertained the thought that perhaps she would marry me, but she told me in the strongest possible terms that she would never lower herself to marry a German. So I remained in the barracks.

## *German Camaraderie in Exile*

We ten German men in the barracks were between the ages of 18 and 35. We had been assigned to work in the garage. The oldest, Henry, was our mechanic. The town had 110 vehicles which were required to haul supplies from the rail station into town.



**Gerhard corresponded with his wife, Nina, hoping that she might be able to join him in exile.** He learned that his son had died, but he sent Nina and his daughter part of his meager salary to help support them. After five years, he found out she had been living with another man and even had a child by him, a crushing blow.

Of these 110 vehicles only 35 were in running condition. Seventy-five were inoperable and needed repair. By the end of the year, we had 75 up and running in good condition. For this accomplishment, our superior received commendation and a large prize. But us 10 German men who had made it happen, working long hours and using our ingenuity, were not mentioned or rewarded. We received only our usual wage of 700 rubles a month.

About this time, our mechanic, Henry, organized a small band. He was a good musician who played the violin beautifully and also the accordion. I bought an accordion from a man who had also served in Germany during the war. We found a few more violins and soon we had a small orchestra. To fill our free time, we busied ourselves with music. This pleased our supervisors.

Most of the workers in this region were here on contract. Because it was considered a hardship region, they received double wages. They could live much better than we Germans could. We were often required to work double time. During the day we worked in the garage, and in the evenings when a shipment came in, we had to unload rail cars. We received four rubles to unload one rail car and a usual shipment was five rail cars.

# GERHARD ♦ German Camaraderie in Exile

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



The men working in a mechanic shop organized a small orchestra to fill their free time. Gerhard played the accordion.

We German men were all single in the North. The families of those who had been married had been banished to other regions. Those who were still single had no opportunity for marriage. The truck drivers who had freedom of movement mostly lived in the south where they had families. But we were stuck in an area where men far outnumbered the women.

In 1952, the government wanted to settle the area, and decided that more women were needed. Twenty-five women arrived, ranging in age from 18 to 35

years. The women's job was to provide us with wood for heating during the long winters. All summer they felled trees and sawed them into firewood. They were stationed in the forest and a tent was erected for their accommodations. We men worked all week in the garages, sometimes day and night. Saturday evenings we were allowed to drive into the forest and spend Sundays with the women. Several of the men had chosen women with whom they would have begun families, but marriage was not a possibility because there was no available housing. I also chose one, named Irene. Irene was from Moscow and had been a bookkeeper. She had been accused of embezzlement and had received a ten year sentence. She had already served five years in prison. Her husband was a Communist Party member, and when she had been accused of a crime against the state, he had been forced to divorce her. She had one child from that marriage. Our relationship was more a friendship than a normal family life.

In 1953 Stalin died, and this brought many changes. An armistice was declared and the women suddenly received their freedom. Irene's former husband arrived to take her back. At first she did not want to return to him, but her husband begged me to persuade her. I seriously considered her options. I



Female prisoners were brought in on a lumber detail. Their work was to provide firewood. The men in exile paired off with them, and Gerhard chose a woman named Irene. But there were no houses to be had, making starting a family impossible. Above, female barracks in Siberia.

# Freedom Restored ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



## Stalin's death in 1953 meant a reprieve from many harsh sentences.

Gerhard was released from his life sentence in 1955, two years later, but didn't have any place to go, so despite his loneliness and the harsh climate, he remained in the far north, where he had a house.

I didn't know where any of my relatives were, or whether they were still alive, and none of them knew where I was. Only my former wife and her parents knew my whereabouts, and they did not want to hear from me. So I determined to build the house, and see what the future would bring. During the summer of 1954, my friends and I built the house, and before winter I had moved in. But I was alone in the house and it seemed very empty without a family.

## *Freedom Restored*

Then in 1955-1956, we were granted our freedom. The sentence for life had been revoked. We were told the conditions: (1) We could not return to our former homeland, the Ukraine; (2) no confiscated goods would be restored to us; and (3) we were not allowed to settle anywhere in the Soviet European areas. We were restricted to live in areas in which most of our German Russian people had been resettled, namely, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, and Kazakhstan.

was banished to this area for life and I could not ask her to remain in this unfriendly region with me. So I persuaded her to return to her husband and child.

I was again unattached. For six years I had lived in the barracks and had slept on the wooden slats. I could see no way that I would ever have a family. My friends offered to build me a house, thinking I would be more marriageable living in my own house than I was living in the barrack. But the big question remained: where in the world would I find a wife? I was not allowed to leave the area.

As one can imagine, I was overjoyed. After all these years of such strict confinement, I was free to move. My first desire was to see my daughter. She was now 16 years, and I was anxious to meet her. I wondered how she would respond to her German father. Would she be ashamed of me?

I took leave which, of course, I had not had for seven years, and traveled to Odessa. I stayed with a friend with whom I had corresponded and where my daughter was to meet me. She came with her grandmother, my wife's mother. I had hoped my wife would also come, but she chose not to. My daughter was a young lady, but I noticed she was poorly dressed and learned that she lived in poverty. She was in the tenth grade already, and it was painful for her to be so poorly dressed. I gave her all the money I had brought along, and told her to buy some decent clothes. I later learned that her mother had taken the money and divided it among all the children.



Gerhard finally owned a house in Siberia in 1954, but he was extremely lonely. He offered to share it with a woman and her children, but the lady was not interested in marriage, especially to a German man.

I again returned to my home in the North. The empty house begged for a family. A woman who had recently come out of the kolkhoz lived in the area with her two children, her sister and her aged mother. Her husband had abandoned her and the children for a younger woman. I invited her and her family to move into my house since they lived in very crowded conditions. They did, but the lady was not interested in marriage, especially to a German man. Our arrangement was that each of us would live our own lives.

# GERHARD ♦ A Dream & a Family Regained

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)



**Gerhard had a dream that deeply troubled him.** He dreamt that he watched his family's funeral for him. He went to see an old lady who was known for her interpretation of dreams, who said, "Your mother has buried you...but in the near future, you will receive news of your family."

The years went by and I aged with them. The government had changed and in theory we were free, but in fact it was not so simple. We German men were free to visit other areas, but were required to sign a contract promising that we would remain in the North for three more years. I signed because I had nowhere else to go. Those who had families were allowed to rejoin them, those who had relatives, joined their relatives. But I remained in the deep North. I had a house and a friend who took care of the household, and I knew nothing of my family or any relatives.

## *A Dream and a Family Regained*

In 1959, I had a peculiar dream. I dreamed that I lay in a coffin in a German protestant church. Encircling the coffin stood all my family, my mother, my sisters, my brothers, who deeply mourned my death. I wanted to call to them, "Why are you grieving? Why are you burying me? I am not dead!" but I had no strength to tell them. When the minister had finished his sermon, and the lid to the coffin was lifted to cover me, I awoke. I was wet from perspiration and deeply troubled. What did this strange dream mean? Not far from my house lived an old lady who was known for her interpretation of dreams. She had been sent to this area during the czarist regime. I visited her and told her my dream. She said, "Your mother has buried you, because she has received word that you are no longer alive. But in the near future you will receive

news of your family. Your whole family is alive, and they are searching for you."

Several months later I received a letter from my mother who was then in Canada. I was deeply puzzled how my mother had discovered where I was. Fourteen years had passed since the end of the war. Later I found out that my mother had searched for me through the Red Cross. The Soviet government had told the Red Cross that I had died in June of 1942 in Zverlos. When she received this news, she had gone to a church and mourned my death in a memorial service. It was this service that I had perceived in my dream.

Suddenly, I began to receive letters from my family: from my sister, Neta, in Canada, from my sister, Tina, in the German Republic, and from my brothers, Henry and Peter, who also lived in the Soviet Union. Peter lived in the Ural Mountain area, and Henry in the Kyrgyz Republic. Most importantly, all were alive. In October, 1959, I took leave and traveled to visit my brothers Henry and Peter. We had lost Henry in 1936 when he was banished to the far North in the Kolyma region. It was 24 years since we had seen each other. He had married a lady



**Gerhard's longing for family was answered.** He first found his brothers, who were still in Russia. Then, fourteen years after the war had ended, he began receiving letters from his mother and two sisters in Canada, who had found him through the Red Cross. They formerly had thought he was dead.

# Nearly Married ♦ GERHARD

Gerhard Dyck (1917-2005)

in the far North, and they had two children.

I remained with Henry for a week, and then traveled to visit Peter in Kirghizia. I discovered he had married his second wife. Before the war he had married Suzanna Sawatsky from our home town and they had had a child. His new wife, Katie, was from the Volga Germans. She also had a sad story to tell. In 1942 the German settlement on the Volga River had been disbanded by the Soviet government. All between the ages of 15 and 55 were conscripted for heavy labor to build up the war machine. They were required to perform heavy labor under the most difficult circumstances, and received barely enough food to remain alive. Many had perished. Peter had also been conscripted into this work force and he had met Katie there. They were subsequently married. They had two children. I asked him about Suzanna, but he knew nothing of her.

It was a wonderful reunion for us to meet after so many years. I again had a family with whom I could correspond, and my future seemed somewhat brighter. I returned to my home in the north country and continued my work.



Approximate locations of Gerhard and his brothers in exile.



**Gerhard's chance at love with a Moscow professor was spoiled when he handed her his passport, and she learned that he was German.** She became hysterical and said, "How could I marry someone from the nation that killed my son's father!"

## *Nearly Married*

My longing for wife and family remained. On my next vacation in 1962, I traveled to the south to Petschehorst. In a restaurant, I met a wonderful lady. She was about 35 years old, intelligent and educated. She was a professor in a Moscow university. We spent a wonderful vacation together. Before she returned to Moscow, we made arrangements that I would visit her in Moscow one week later. I sent her a telegram telling her of my arrival time, and she and her son met me on the train platform.

She took me to her apartment, and I was surprised that she lived in quite poor circumstances. I had been under the impression that someone in her position would receive a good salary and would have better housing. She said that the state had promised to give her

better living quarters shortly. I spent a few very enjoyable days with her.

Towards the end of my stay, she asked if I was married. In Russia the custom was to stamp the passport "married" when a person married, so I handed her my passport. She leafed through it and when she noticed that my nationality was marked "German," she became hysterical. She began to scream, "Why did you not tell me that you were German? How could I possibly marry a German? What would I tell my students, and what could I possibly tell my son? How could I marry someone from the nation that killed his father?" She vehemently accused and scolded me. It did not take me long to pick up my suitcase, bid my farewell, and return to the North country.

So ended my search for wife and family. On the long journey home, which took seven days and seven nights by train, I had much time to ponder. I had experienced high expectations and again deep disappointment.