

THE GREAT TREK

1943-1944

Thirty-five thousand Mennonites were among the 350,000 ethnic Germans who left the Soviet Union with the retreating German army in 1943-44 during World War II. Their departure, at times orderly and at times desperate, is known as "The Great Trek."



As the Germans lost ground in Russia after the Battle of Stalingrad ended (February, 1943) and the Battle of Kursk was lost (July 1943), they began to evacuate the *Volksdeutsche* (the ethnic Germans living in Russia) ahead of the retreating German Army. Most Mennonites were glad to go. They had experienced a much more benign rule under German occupation than they had under Soviet communism.

The Germans gave evacuees short notice, just a day or two. Mayors of villages in the Molotschna Mennonite Colony, on the east side of the Dnieper River, were ordered to secure wagons for each family on September 9 and 10, and their evacuation began on September 12, 1943. The wagon train was 10 kilometers long. As the front moved westward, the Germans ordered the Chortitza Mennonites to evacuate, which occurred on October 18, 1943. Mennonites from Zgradovka (southwest of Chortitza) joined the trek as well.

The first part of the Great Trek was well-organized. Many families traveled by wagon, while the Germans

transported others by rail. The Germans loaded many people from the Chortitza colony on trucks and brought them by train to Kulm, Poland, where they stayed for several months. Once the front came closer, they moved the refugees west again.

Most of the *Volksdeutsche* passed through Lodz, Poland, which was the equivalent of Ellis Island or Halifax for them. At the Immigration Main Office there, the S.S. completed a racial screening of the evacuees, and granted ethnic Germans citizenship. In March, 1944, they were sent to the German-occupied Warthegau area of Poland, where the Germans ousted Polish natives to give the refugees homes in villages and farms.

By January 17-18, 1945, the Red Army had reached Poland. The German Army needed all trains and jeeps for military personnel, and were not able to transport the refugees any further. The refugees, who had previously been protected by the German Army, were now on their own.

This began an extremely perilous part of the Great Trek. Most Mennonite men had been murdered, exiled,

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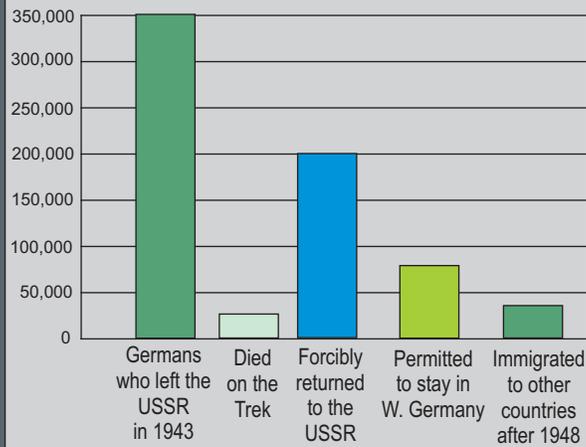
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or drafted, so the families consisted of the elderly, women, and children, an especially defenseless group. On foot or wagon, these German refugees sought to remain behind German lines. Being caught behind Soviet lines would likely mean exile or death for them, since they had sided with the Germans.

It was wintertime. The refugee population, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, had to continually flee west as the Russian Army advanced through Poland. Each night was spent in a different place, and each day was filled with worry for survival. They were completely dependent on the charity of strangers, and a little bit of food or warmth sometimes meant the difference between life and death.

Some of the refugees reached Germany, but did not go far enough. The Yalta Agreement, drawn up in February, 1945, required that displaced people return to their country of origin, and set the Elbe River as the geographical dividing line between east and west. Unfortunate refugees who happened to be east of the river were sent back to the Soviet Union. Even in the

Fate of Germans who left the Soviet Union on the Great Trek



western zone, the Allies forced some refugees to return to the USSR in compliance with the Yalta Agreement. Between 1945 and 1947, about 23,000 Mennonites of the 35,000 who left were repatriated, including those who had collaborated with the Germans. Few returned to their homes; most were exiled to Siberia or were executed upon their return to Russia.

Of the 350,000 Russian-born Germans who began the Great Trek in 1943, here is what became of them: about 20,000-25,000 of them (6-7%) died on the trek. After the war, more than 200,000 Russian-born Germans (60%) were forcibly returned to the Soviet Union, where they were sent to Siberia or Central Asia. Approximately 75,000 (21%) were permitted to remain in West Germany at the end of the war; and of those, 30,000 (8%) immigrated to other countries after 1948.

Of the 35,000 Mennonites who began the Great Trek, only about 12,000 were able to stay in Germany, many in refugee camps. After many negotiations, about 6,000 refugees immigrated to Canada, and the remaining 6,000 went to South America.



Mennonites left their homes in the Soviet Union during the Great Trek either by wagon or train. The Germans transported many by train to Poland, in conditions so crowded that people sometimes had to sit upright for days.



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Many refugees spent the entire winter exposed to the elements, continuously moving from one place to another.



German refugees being evicted from Lodz, Poland.



Refugees getting a hot cooked meal in Berlin. Many groups set up emergency stations to aid displaced people.



Displaced Germans waiting for a train in Berlin, Germany.



How far is far enough? Some refugees fled to Berlin or eastern Germany, but after the Yalta Agreement made the Elbe River the dividing line between the Soviet and Western zones, they were sent back to Russia and treated as traitors.



Refugees walking by bombed buildings and rubble.

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Refugees were continually moving, trying to find safety. The roads were crowded with wagons, soldiers, jeeps and military vehicles trying to get to the front, and civilians fleeing away from it.



Each night was spent in a different place, sometimes in the cold bed of a wagon or along the side of the road and sometimes in a barn where hay provided warmth.



Train transport was scarce and involved long waits as tracks were repaired.

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Anna Penner left Ukraine during the Great Trek and buried her mother, Anganetha Penner, along the way. Anna was Neta Loewen's aunt, and Anganetha Penner was Neta's grandmother. Anna and Neta shared a house for 35 years in Canada. Here is Anna's account of the Great Trek.



Anna Penner (L) left Nieder-Chortitz with her mother, Anganetha Bergen Penner (R), who died along the trek at a Russian village. The last thing she told Anna was "I am praying for you all, that God will protect you." They buried her in a Russian cemetery.

In September 1943, when the German army retreated, the German people left Russia as well. Most people went by horse and buggy. The sick, and women with small children, went by train. We went

by train because my mother was sick. In my family, there were six of us who left Russia at the same time: my mother, me, my sister Lena, my nieces Anni and Tina, and Tina's 2-year-old son Victor. The German people were very happy to leave Russia.

We stopped for ten days at a Russian village named Verhevika, where my mother died. She had heart disease and had been failing for some time. We had made a bed on top of some crates for her and I sat by her bed much of the time. The last night I had been dozing in my chair, and she said to me, "You are so tired, why don't you lay down and get some rest? I want to sleep this night also."

I said, "Mother, I will lay down on the floor here by you, and if you need anything, wake me." After a little while, I heard her talking. I couldn't understand what she was saying, so I asked, "Mother, do you need anything?"

"No, child," she said, "I do not need anything. I am praying for you all, that God will protect you."

Then she was quiet. She stopped talking and moaning. I thought, "She is asleep, now I will catch a little sleep also." But before I lay down, I took one look at her to make sure, and realized that she was gone. Those were her last words to me, that she was praying for the protection of her family.

We were able to bury her in that Russian village. Most of our town was still together, and she had a Christian burial. Before we left home, she said, "I may die on this trip. When I die, if possible, I would like to be buried, even if it is in a Russian cemetery, as long as you don't have to leave me somewhere by the side of the road." When we left the village, we drove past the cemetery, and I was able to see her grave, which was marked with a cross. Some Russian people promised us that when it would be possible, they

would move her to a cemetery in a German town that was not far from there. I don't know that was done. She was 73 years old when she died.

From there we came to Prescuro, in Poland, then to Lizmannstadt. There the Russians had surrounded us and it looked like we would be taken captive. But the German soldiers were able to break through the Russian line and we were able to escape. The German soldiers took care of us and were concerned that we get out.

We continued to Apostel where there was a train accident. Another train collided with ours and three people were killed in our wagon alone. The people were transported in cattle cars, which were heated by pot-belly stoves. They were hot, and when the train hit, the stove fell on Lisa Penner's mother and she burned to death. That was terrible. In one car, three children of the same family were killed. I was holding Victor on my lap, and he hung so limp in my arms, I asked him, "Victor, are you alive?" He was alive. After the accident we were loaded into another train.

From Russia we came to Warthegau, from there we came to Lampertswalde, to Dresden, and from there we were sent to Yugoslavia.