

# Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded

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Edited by Jill Nicholson

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## Focus on Ukraine

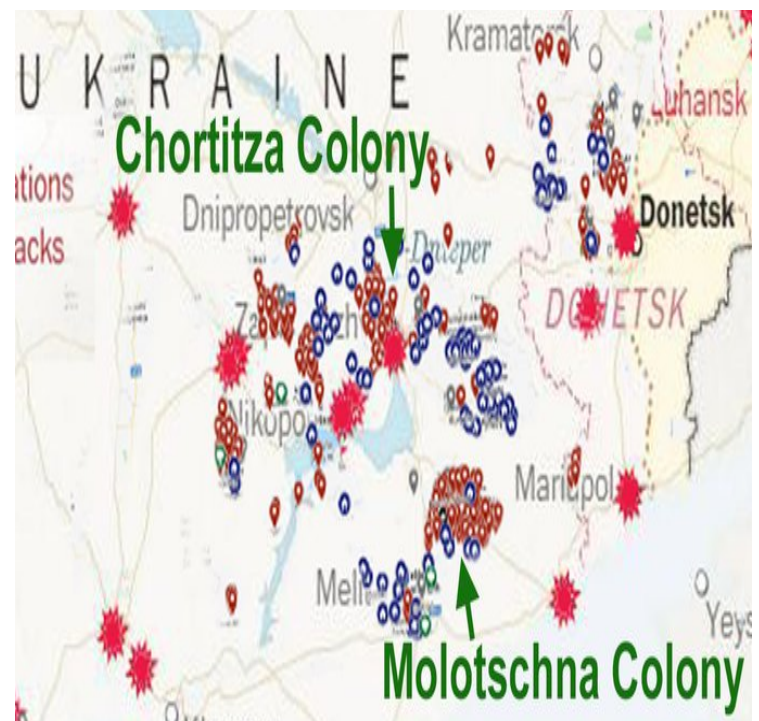
By Jill Nicholson

As I write this, Ukraine is under siege by the Russians. We all look with alarm at the attacks on both commercial and civilian locations. Many Mennonites with family history in Ukraine are watching these events closely. Some are familiar with many of the areas in the conflict from organized heritage trips. Many of the important historical buildings are in danger of destruction and some have already been destroyed. To date, there are many civilian casualties, including children and pregnant women.

To commemorate their ties to the Ukrainian people, Mennonites continue to provide support. The Mennonite Centre was established in Molochansk, formerly named Halbstadt by the founding Mennonites. Located in a former Mennonite Girls' School and founded in 2000, the Centre provides humanitarian support to Southern Ukraine for seniors, students, medical institutions and schools. With the onset of the war, the Centre sends approximately \$4,000 daily for food and medical supplies. The Mennonite Central Committee, which was founded originally in 1920 to feed the starving in Ukraine, has now turned in 2022 to supporting the displaced in Ukraine by working with its established connections to provide food, bedding and hygiene products. Many Mennonite churches are sponsoring fundraising endeavours and events and providing information to members and the general public on the war and how to help. EKMHA sponsored a talk on the history of Ukraine by Andrew Stebelsky, a local history teacher with Ukrainian roots with proceeds to the Mennonite Centre. Donations of \$11,515 were sent to the Friends of the Mennonite Centre, Ukraine. In this issue of the Historian, we will be exploring the

stories of Mennonites who had to flee Ukraine during World War II. Many left without husbands and fathers who were conscripted to fight. The stories of those fleeing Ukraine today are hauntingly similar to the 1940s. Many of the Mennonite refugees felt the same fear and the same difficulties. They followed similar routes to neighbouring countries to find safety. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine during this very trying time.

Find below a current map of southern Ukraine with the Mennonite colonies superimposed. (Credit: Freundschaft Photo)



Ernie, son of Johann and Agnes Neufeld and brother of two, was born on September 12, 1934 in the Ukraine into a German Mennonite family. It wasn't ideal to be a German in the Ukraine at that time because it was the beginning of the war (World War II) and they were in a country that was at war with Germany. Ernie lived in a very small one room home with his family and they were not very well off as far as money goes, but they had each other and were a tightly knit family. Even though life was not perfect, and war and persecution was upon them, Ernie was content with what he had.

Ernie's father wasn't around for any of his adult life. He was a truck driver and it was memorable for Ernie because it was a rare thing back in the 30s and 40s. He would often sit with his dad in the truck or help him fix it. That was most of the time they spent together. His father took his children to the movies which was looked down upon at the time. He was arrested because the police in the Ukraine accused him of being a German spy since he was German. Ernie and his family never saw their father or heard from him again until they received news of his execution many years later.

As a child, Ernie spent a lot of time playing with other children doing things such as swimming in the lake, singing in the choir at church, sports and reading. There was never a dull moment for him growing up. He would sled down the hills during the winter and play by the streams and rivers in the summer. As a young boy, he wanted to be a truck driver like his father since it was such a unique occupation, but he later realized that he wanted to be a teacher. He was put to work on the family farm at a very young age. It didn't seem to be a job for him because he loved working with the horses and took any chance to ride them when he could. Ernie's brother, William was two and a half years older and his sister Helen was one and a half years older. The three siblings were in preschool together from the time Ernie was three to five years old and none of them got an elementary education or higher. During the war times, Ernie, his brother and sister would often go out to look for bullet cartridges and take the bullets out for fun. They would also go into the forest to try to catch rabbits by putting salt on their tails (which they later found out was just a lie that the adults

had told them to keep them busy) and into the orchards to eat all the fruit they could.

In 1943 when Ernie was only nine years old, his family left their home. The war had taken a turn for the worse for the Germans and their country, so their country was no longer a safe place for them. They had to change their whole life just to survive. They had to flee their country due to persecution and the threat of arrest from their own home country's police. Ernie's family was trying to flee to German territory because they were German and they would not be persecuted there on top of everything else that was going on. They were fleeing from the Ukraine for three months before they made it into Poland. Those months were the hardest Ernie and his family had and would ever have to face.

His mother had the largest impact on his life. She was a kind and soft-hearted woman who was easily intimidated and scared by anyone or anything., but she always knew what to do. She spent her life protecting her family, especially during the war times while fleeing the Ukraine. His mother was always planning ahead, making sure that she and her children were prepared for what was to come. She made a bag of roasted zweiback for each child and herself and ID papers for all of them. She made pillowcases for her children to carry belongings which was very smart because of all the travelling they had to do. Later, their bags were thrown off the wagon which meant they no longer had their food, ID papers or ration cards. Since they lost their ration cards, which was the only way to get food, Ernie's mother and older brother went looking for food. While his mom and brother were gone, Ernie was left to take care of his sister when an air-raid hit. They made it to a shelter safely, but a chunk of the wall was caved in due to the explosion. After the bombing, Ernie met up with his mother and brother and they continued their journey to Poland. The other people going through the same struggle were all very helpful along the way and they all treated each other as equals. Ernie and his family wanted to be as far away from Communism as possible.

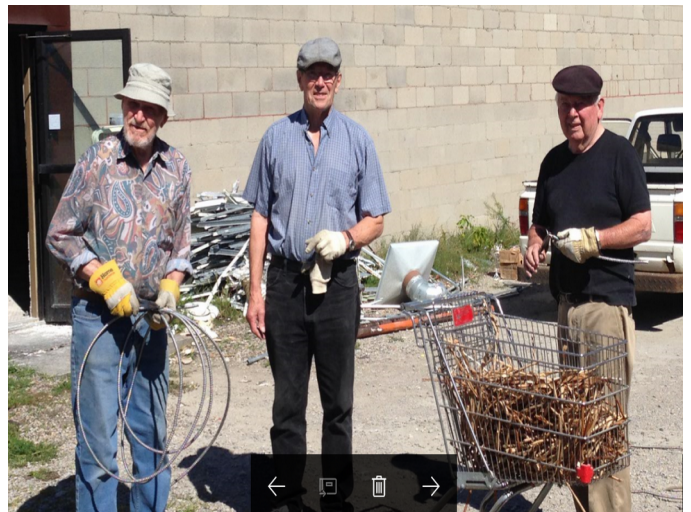
After the three months of struggle escaping from the Ukraine and the clutches of Communism, Ernie, his mother and two siblings arrived in Poland. They lived

there from March 1944 to January 1945 and then moved to Germany. His family was sent care packages from Canada because they didn't have anything in Germany. They lived there until November 1948 when they made their journey to Canada. Ernie and his brother lived at their mother's cousin's house, Henry and Margaret Brown until they got their own apartment/farm house three months later. Their apartment in Leamington Ontario had electricity, a well, two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. They lived in this house for about ten years and moved to Kingsville Ontario for twenty-nine years and then moved back to Leamington where he is today. Ernie had a number of jobs during his time in Canada. He worked at a lumber mill for thirteen years and went back to farming for three years where he raised his family at the farm house. Ernie stopped farming full-time and took farming on as a part-time job due to financial reasons. He then worked as a carpenter for thirteen years and then at General Motors for another fourteen years.

Ernie met his wife at church. They were in a choir together, so going to choir practice for the two of them was like courting. The two got married after five years in 1960 and had four children: Amy Elizabeth, David Allen, Robert James and Ernest John who are all married. He also has seven grandchildren. Today, Ernie and his wife sing in the Heritage choir at church. He volunteers a couple of days a week at Gleaners and helps at the Mennonite Home. He still likes to go for long walks with friends or by himself at Point Pelee. Ernie gets together with friends to play cards every now and then. He and his wife travel to Europe every few years or so to see friends and family and also make trips to other places in Ontario and the U.S. to see kids and grandkids. Ernie now lives in Leamington Ontario with his wife and is currently retired. He lives in a complex that is taken care of, but he and his wife are both completely capable.



Wedding Photo – Ernie Neufeld and Emilie Gossen -1960



Gathering scrap metal during the renovation of the Thrift on Mill MCC Shop

L to R: John Wiens, Ernie Neufeld, Henry Janzen

George Schartner is a hard-working man that has been through tough times but has endured and attained what can only be described as success. He is a man who was born during a tough time and raised during an even tougher one. He lost his home and eventually found a new home in Canada. He built a new life and started a family of his own.

George Schartner was born in the small village of Nikoleidorf in Ukraine. He was born October 21, 1936. He was born just three years after the Great Famine that plagued Ukraine. Although it is impossible to say with absolute certainty how many people starved to death, historians say that up to ten million Ukrainians died. George was born just after this terrible time, as things were just starting to get better. He was born to a Mennonite farmer and his wife. George was born the second youngest of his siblings. He had two brothers and three sisters.

His father was taken from the family while George was very young and was drafted to the Russian military in 1941. He never fought on the front lines but helped the war effort by digging trenches. His family fell ill and died sometime during the war. Although his father was gone from a very young age, he remembers that he was a kind man. George grew up and lived in Ukraine until age seven, when World War II came to his small Ukrainian village.

Up until this point, the war had had little effect on George. The German forces had taken Ukraine without resistance early in the war and had pressed on to Moscow. By 1943, however, the German forces were retreating from Ukraine because the Russian army who had pressed them back were destroying them in battle. To protect the people, the German troops had told them to pack up and evacuate. George, his mother, his siblings and the entire village retreated ahead of the army so that they would not be caught in the fighting. They retreated by wagon train to Germany in September 1943. Having only a blanket to cover them from the weather, George and his family left. Since he was very young, he stayed on the wagon mostly and was just along for the ride. Although these were hard times for him and his family, he recounts never being sad or unhappy.

Once George and his family were in Germany, they became refugees and were assigned to live with a German farmer. They waited out the rest of the war in western Germany. During this time, George started attending school. He, along with the rest of the family, also became German citizens. He recounts seeing the allied soldiers when they came through near the end of the war. They would check to make sure there weren't any German soldiers in hiding.

After living in Germany for four years, the Schartner family moved to Canada. There was more opportunity in Canada and there were many other Mennonites there who would help them. His family arrived in Canada in January 1948, sponsored by the John Dick family. His family was part of the huge wave of Mennonites that immigrated to Canada after World War II. He was part of the 8,000 Mennonites that came to Canada during this time. Many of these Mennonites, including George, settled in Ontario.

Upon first arriving, the family that had sponsored them took them in and gave them a place to stay. George started in the public school system in Grade One at age eleven at Blytheswood Public School. After three years, he went to Mill Street Public School. His family lived a few blocks down from the Mill Street School, and George would walk to school every day. He picked up the English language very quickly and it eventually became his primary language. He moved through the grades very quickly and eventually graduated from Mill Street School in 1952 at age 15. During summers, he would pick fruit and berries to make a few dollars. He was a hard worker and always got the job done.

He then attended UMEI Christian High School. Although he was a few years older than his peers, he fit in, worked hard and did well in high school. During the summers between school years, George worked as a farm hand. He worked on a tobacco farm, guiding horses, priming tobacco and other odd jobs. During his time in high school, he met the woman he would spend the rest of his life with. Her name was Gisela. They first met in 1956 at church. Gisela and George were both in the choir and after offering her a ride home one night, they began their lifelong relationship.

Gisela had experienced much the same past as George. Gisela Wiebe was born in Prussia (modern day Poland) in 1940. She also retreated in front of the German army during World War II. She lived in Germany during and after the war. She moved to Canada in 1951 and settled in Southern Ontario.

After finishing Grade 12 at UMEI in 1956, George attended Leamington District Secondary School for Grade 13. During this time, he got his first taste of teaching. The guidance counsellor gave students the opportunity to shadow a teacher and then teach a lesson. After sitting in on four classes, he then prepared a lesson and taught the students. He enjoyed teaching children and it felt natural to him. George decided then that it would be his career. He couldn't have picked a better time because this was during the baby boom after World War II. After the war, returning soldiers had many children. When it would come time for all those children to go to school, there would be many new teaching jobs created.

He began in Teachers' College in 1957. He learned valuable teaching and lesson planning skills. He learned how to teach and did it well in Teachers' College and became a certified teacher in 1958 at age 22. He was then hired as a full-time teacher the same year at Ruthven Public School. After being hired, he decided to ask Gisela to be his wife. George Schartner and Gisela Wiebe married August 22, 1959. He remained at Ruthven for 13 years until 1972. During this time, the school was torn down and rebuilt in 1965.

The school was not the only thing to change during those 13 years. George and Gisela had their children during this time. Their first child was Monica, born in 1960. Their second, Judy, was born in 1961. Carolyn was born in 1964. Diane was born in 1967. Robert, the youngest, was born in 1972. However, Robert Schartner sadly passed away in a car accident on September 8, 1999.

George continued to master his craft and eventually was made principal in 1965. By this time, he had his bachelor's degree. He had been taking courses at night and during summers to get it. He took on all the duties of the principal and taught at the same time. It

was a busy time for George, but he was no stranger to hard work. He maintained a balance between work and family and was eventually transferred. George Schartner then became the principal of Mill Street Public School in 1972. During this time, he got certified as a principal and got his master's degree. By this time, he was a full-time principal. He was in charge of hundreds of children staff and had to keep them in order. He put his organizational and leadership skills to good use and kept the school running smoothly until 1976. George was transferred to Comber Centennial School in 1976. He remained principal there until his retirement in 1993. George had become a respected principal and a good leader. He could be counted upon to keep the school organized and under control. He worked hard and at age 56 he retired.

He spends his days with his wife and gets some well-earned relaxation. After years of teaching children, George now enjoys golf, bowling and travelling, taking a few strokes off his golf game, adding a few strikes to his bowling and taking a trip back to his birth village in 1995.

Work and family are not the only part of George's life. George is a man of faith. A man who has worshipped God his entire life. He was raised in a Christian home and was taught God's word from a young age. He was taught right from wrong and how to worship God. George lives his life for Christ and devotes his life to serving Christ and spreading the work.

Upon arriving in Canada, George began going to the Leamington United Mennonite Church. When he became a teacher, he put the skills he had learned to good use in the church. He began a Sunday school teacher and began teaching the children God's work. He then became the leader of the young group and continued to use his teaching experience to inspire the youth and lead them in their faith journey. Using his experience with children and teaching, he served God's church. As he became more of a leader in his teaching career, he took more leadership and management roles in the church and became secretary. He served as chairman of the church council for two terms. He is an active member of the church and uses his God-given gifts to further his kingdom.

# The Refugee Story of Helene (Winter) Dyck

by Luise Taves

October 13, 1943 was evacuation day of the villages in the Chortiza colony, Ukraine. The German front began their ordered retreat. There had been only a few days notice so there was a flurry of activity. Chickens were butchered and cooked then stored in large pails and covered in broth. The fat would rise to the top and seal the pail. In this way they would keep for two weeks. Pigs were butchered and ground pork made into meatballs. Horses and wagons were prepared for the exodus but at the last minute trains arrived. This was a long moment held in time. Hearts were heavy as they left their homes and villages. Lena (Helene) often told stories of village life, where everyone lived, where the school was, where the valley filled with fragrant violets in the spring, where the youth gathered in the orchard on Sunday evenings to sing song after song all from memory; now to be left behind.

Military trucks filled with evacuees drove to the train station at Kanzerovka. As evening descended a hush fell over this assembled mass and they began to sing "Nun ade du mein lieb Heimatland", (Farewell to you my beloved homeland). Later a loud explosion shattered the evening. The mighty Dnjeper Dam, one of the seven wonders of the world, had been dynamited. After three days of waiting, the train left the station. The Winter family travelled together; the parents Heinrich and Katharina, daughter Lena (20), son Heinrich (18) and youngest daughter Tina (14). There were 50-55 people per train car. Wooden benches had been built and refugees sat packed in one against the other. Feet and ankles grew swollen from lack of circulation. Young teenage boys rode in the food storage boxcar to guard the food. The train travelled slowly. A trip that could have been accomplished in twenty four hours took seventeen days. There were frequent stops at sidings to allow military trains through or toilet stops or cooking stops. Only once did a bomb fall near them and food was abandoned as the train moved on.

Finally they reached the first destination; Kochlawitz in Poland. Everybody out! Stretching and fresh air and grouping into family units. A large college and dormitory building became the new home.



*Arrival of refugees to Kochlowitz*

Large rooms housed two families and small rooms held one family. Home away from home. Lena recounts that if newspapers were available she would cut a decorative border around it to create a tablecloth of sorts and wildflowers in a jar became the centre piece. There was a communal kitchen but each family had its own eating space in their own quarters. Lena had trained as a kindergarten teacher at the teachers college in Chortiza and taught in Neuenburg during the German occupation. She was now appointed as Kindergarten teacher once more. Women in the work force were allotted sturdy brown leather work shoes. All refugees were given jobs as well. It was during this time that Kindergarten teachers were accorded an educational retreat to a facility in the hills of Oberschlesian.



*Helene Winter, 2<sup>nd</sup> left, with kindergarten teachers in Kochlowitz*

What an experience to treasure. Private rooms, white linens, cafeteria food and then field trips into the woods to gather blueberries. They learned new songs and games. The course ran two weeks but after one week she became anxious over her separation from her family and returned home. During this time she bought a beautiful delicate wool length of cloth to be a good Sunday dress and for her engagement to Rudy Dyck. Community life here was settled for almost one year. Life felt relatively stable but young men were now drafted. Lena's younger brother was only eighteen and among those drafted. After a short training period they were given leave to return to family and bid farewell then they would be given placement with the military. Caught in a retreating German front facing a Russian advance, pacifism could only be an ideal, not a reality.

In the fall of 1944 the refugees were relocated to Bensburg. They arrived at an empty town and were placed into the houses. Some were assigned to farm work. Lena worked in the kitchen of the officer's quarters while her mother and Tina worked in the hospital laundry. In early October Rudy Dyck suddenly arrived on leave. His two weeks ended but time passed and he was not recalled so it was felt that the war must be very near its end. It might be safe to plan Rudy's and Lena's wedding. A wedding! Everyone's spirits lifted. How had Lena's mother managed to find material and time to sew a wedding dress and add fine stitching details to the dress? Seventy five guests were invited. Everyone contributed ration cards to assemble potatoes, cabbage and carrots to make enough borscht. There were no tomatoes so lots of paprika was added to create the characteristic red colour. Each guest would receive one bowl of borscht and one slice of bread. Little servings of green beans with sugar sprinkles were served as desert. Young Susie Paetkau remembers it as a wonderful treat-even years later. The service was held at the local hall with Reverend Jacob Neudorf of Osterwick officiating.



*Wedding Photo  
of Helena Winter  
and Rudy Dyck*

Eight days later, Rudy was recalled to military duty. He recalls walking to the train station with Lena. Dark and foggy, one yard light illuminated the station. Would they ever see each other again? The popular songs "Lili Marleen" and "Es geht alles Vorueber..." encircled them. Unknown to them he would be sent to the eastern front. But the time in Bensburg was short. January 17, 1945 they were again evacuated. The train would leave at midnight. The Pictures! Lena and Tina ran back and locked the door. Footsteps approached. A heavy tread. Knocking at the door. hey waited what seemed a long time. Finally the steps walked on. When they felt safe they gathered up the pictures and ran back. The train arrived at 3:00 a.m. Johnsbach is a small village in Germany near the Czechoslovakian border. The time here was spent on the small farm of a widow Fr. Glaeditsch. While here Dresden was bombed. The night turned to day. Little did Lena know that Rudy was in Dresden. German lines did not hold and before long Russian soldiers occupied this village. No one slept well and a two hour watch was taken by each family member during the night. The second floor of the farmhouse had a door that opened directly on to the hill if escape were needed. Refugees now surged to the train station at Jena nearby. They made camp here. Russians were repatriating former Soviet citizens. Could they get passage west? At one time near the tracks three Russian soldiers approached Lena, Tina and Sonia Lempke. Sonia bravely opened the conversation in Russian! She asked them where they were from. "Zaparoschje" they answered. "And we are homesick." "Us too" the girls responded and a friendly conversation followed after which they walked back to the camp. It was here that three men walked in one day. They were Rudy Dyck, Jacob Paetkau and Heinrich Winter. Joy for this reunion but shadowed by the urgency to retreat west and out of Russian occupation. After much effort they travelled by train to Westfalen where many refugee groups found placements. Rudy, Lena and the rest of the family lived at the estate Vorder-Eichholz. Lena loved her time here. Everyone worked and socialized. Regular church services were held as well as baptisms. Rudy's brother Bernhardt was here as well. The two brothers received the news that their parents had been repatriated with young brother Cornelius. It was here that Lena and Rudy's daughter Luise was born and that they received their papers to emigrate to Canada.

*Nich dit...Nich daut*

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca)

**Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre**

- AGM – May 13, 7:00 p.m. Heritage Centre
- Call 519-326-0456 or email [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca) for updates

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Membership Fee (\$15 per person/group) \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Donation to Heritage Centre (Optional) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to receive email about EKMHA news and events?  Yes please  No thank you

Are you interested in volunteering 1 hour/month or more?  Yes, send me info  No thank you

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Memberships valid from January 1<sup>st</sup> to Dec 31<sup>st</sup>  
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Your support helps EKMHA continue its mission of preserving the histories of the Mennonites of Essex and Kent Counties. Membership costs only **\$15/year** for an individual, church, organization, or business.



*Kindergarten at play, Kochlawitz*