

The promised land

When the Swedes first settled in the Ukraine in the late 18th century the area had been sold to them as 'the promised land'. The immigrants were mainly farmers and fishermen from Dagoe, an island in the Baltic Sea which is now part of Estonia. In 1563, the island was conquered by Sweden but by 1710 it was part of the Russian empire. The farmers, faced with eviction by their Swedish landlords because of ever-increasing taxes, petitioned their new empress, Catherine II. During Catherine's reign (1762-96) more than 11,000 square miles of new lands were added to the Russian Empire, including the so-called 'New Russia' in southern Ukraine. Prince Gregory Potemkin, the governor of New Russia urgently needed settlers to colonise these new lands and defend them from the Turks. So when Catherine received the petition from the Dagoe farmers, she gave them land free of charge in newly annexed territory on the west bank of the River Dnepr. The farmers were promised houses and over 60 hectares of well-sown fields of fertile chernozem soils per family.

In August 1781 almost 1,000 Swedes journeyed across European Russia. Many died in the harsh winter and by May 1782 only 535 people reached their destination. There were no houses and the land, though fertile, was uncultivated.

Only 135 people survived the first year - not even enough to cultivate the 13,000 hectares of land they had claimed.



Above: locals gather at the Zmeyovka cemetery. Right: the route taken by the Swedes to Gammalsvenskby

was given a new name—Zmeyovka—after one of the nearby German villages. In the 1960s reorganisation into state farms divided the Swedish families. The Swedish school had been closed in the mid-1930s so young people had no opportunities to learn Swedish. In the 1970s and early 1980s life in the village was once again completely isolated from the outside world—foreign correspondence was not allowed.

With the lifting of the Iron Curtain during Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980s, a flow of Swedish visitors began. In May 1991, Peter Martis, who was born in Gammalsvenskby in 1916 and left in 1929 with his parents, visited the village. "It has become much worse," he says, "There were more flowers when I left. The streets looked neater as Swedes used to clean them every Saturday. Nobody seems to care about them. But what struck me most was seeing the River Dnepr. I did not recognise it. There were many beautiful wooded islands that we used to visit. Now [after the construction of the Kakhovskoye reservoir in 1955] they have disappeared." Many changes have taken place in the last 60 years. Old Swedes still speak the old Swedish language but few of their children and even fewer of their grandchildren can understand them today.

People complain about their difficult lives, meagre salaries and lack of essential provisions. In the last few years, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the economic situation has got worse. The Swedes manage to survive mainly by growing food on their private land plots. Last summer's drought meant crop failures. Several containers of provisions, medicines and equipment, have been forwarded to Zmeyovka over the last three years from Sweden. Unfortunately this humanitarian aid has flared up long-standing conflicts between the Swedes and other nationals in the village.

However, there are examples of positive co-



operation between different nationalities which now amount to 14, including Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Tatars, Uzbeks, Tadjiks—as well as Swedes and Germans. The old Swedish church, used since the 1930s as a club, canteen and finally warehouse, has recently been restored by volunteers. The present church, reconstructed from ruins, is a unique building, combining a Swedish Lutheran tower and Ukrainian Orthodox onion-shaped dome. Owing to its hospitable keeper, this church is also unique in its acceptance of different religions. Normally the service is carried out in Ukrainian. When, once or twice a year, the village is visited by Swedish reverends the sermons and Holy Communion are carried out in Swedish.

But there is no denying that life in the village is hard. Combine this with the new freedom to travel and it is proving irresistible to the younger inhabitants of Zmeyovka, many of whom are looking for ways to emigrate to Sweden. In 1994, 116 Swedes were registered as living in Zmeyovka with another 169 in the surrounding Berislav Region. But that was before the young people began to move away. If it goes on, the enclave could disappear within one or two generations. •

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