

GAMMALSVENSKBY

a Swedish village in Ukraine



Rabbits have nibbled all the bark off the bottom of the young acacia trees. Along the roadsides there is a profusion of yellow flowers. Here and there walnut trees. And chestnuts too. Our driver swerves to avoid a great hole in the rutted road. A hub cap flies off towards the verge and a gaggle of white geese look reprovingly at our car. Our driver stops, walks with determination towards the geese, retrieves the hub cap, and then pauses for a smoke. Nearby, there is a little roadside kiosk, a confusion of metal and plastic with a blue and yellow roof. It sells fruit, cigarettes, toothpaste, a range of gaudy icons and pictures of bearded patri-

archs. We buy some melon. Then back to the car — an ancient Zaporozhet — for more bumps, and the dull thud of shock absorbers that have long since abdicated any responsibility for safety or comfort. Eventually there are glimpses of the river away to the south, some vineyards, old women sitting in front of white cottages selling tomatoes and marrows, and then, amid a cloud of dust, we arrive at Gammalsvenskby.

The name means Old Swedish Town, but this is not Sweden but southern Ukraine. A hundred kilometres upstream from where the muddy Dnepr eventually reaches the Black Sea lies Gammalsvenskby, an unlikely outpost of Scandi-

navian manners in a remote agricultural region that is well off the usual tourist trails. It is a region that people pass through on the way from Kyjiv to the Crimea; occasionally a Swedish tour group will stop off, bemused to find a place in this foreign land with hints of home. Kherson Oblast is another world from Stockholm.

Fifty years ago this part of the Dnepr river was dammed. A great barrier was built across the river at Nova Kakhovka (Нова Каховка), a few kilometres down river from Gammalsvenskby. Upstream of the new dam a long reservoir slowly filled the shallow valley. Some villages disappeared below the rising waters, but Gammalsvenskby, sitting on a bluff above the side of the valley, was lucky. It gained a new source of irrigation water, and a fine view south over the growing lake.

Nowadays Gammalsvenskby is part of the community of Zmiievka (Зміївка). The old Swedish street names have been replaced by Ukrainian equivalents, but that doesn't stop some of the older residents still speaking of Nealinja, Nibin and Taknegårda, all road names that have disappeared from modern maps. The white Swedish Lutheran church in the centre of the village has been embellished with a dome and Orthodox style cross that gives it a peculiarly ecumenical demeanour. From time to time, usually in the summer, a visiting Swedish pastor will still preach with musical cadence here to the dwindling number of Swedish speakers in Gammalsvenskby. Larissa, the school teacher, is one of the younger Swedish speakers, but nowadays there are no Swedish speaking children in her class.

The northern Black Sea region plays host to some remarkably resilient cultural minorities. In an earlier issue of *hidden europe*, we explored the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi in Georgia's secessionist province of Abkhazia (*hidden europe* 3). But Swedes in Ukraine must surely be a curiosity even to dedicated followers of diaspora politics and cultures.

Gammalsvenskby has a convoluted history. The first settlers came not from modern Sweden at all, but from the island of Hiiumaa off the coast of Estonia. Years of conflict with tetchy landowners had left the Hiiumaa Swedes worn down, and when they were gently persuaded

Baltic Swedes

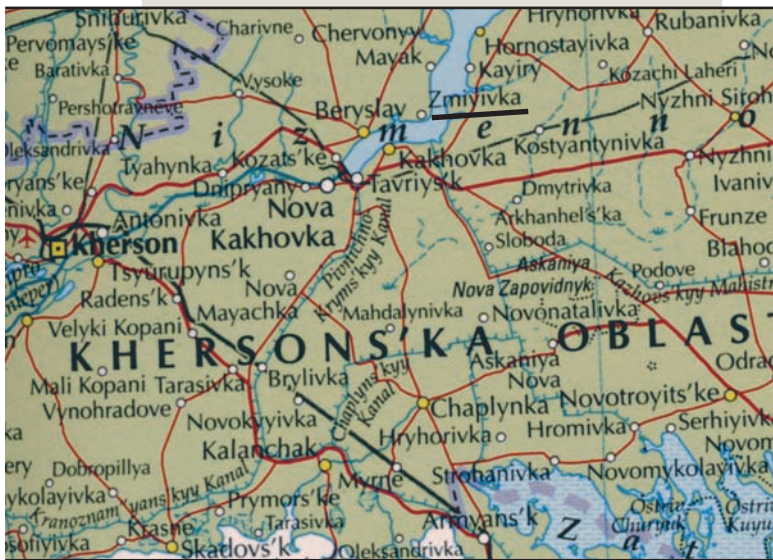
The Swedes on Hiiumaa who set off in 1781 on the long trek to southern Ukraine were just one of many Swedish communities in the eastern Baltic. To this day, substantial areas of southwest Finland use Swedish as their first language. Some Estonian islands, like Vormsi and Ruhnu remained almost entirely Swedish speaking well into the last century. Nowadays, although most of the Estonian island Swedes fled or perished in the second world war, hints of a Swedish past are still evident in many Estonian islands.

to look for new opportunities, Russia saw the chance of hard working folk who might help settle the Black Sea lands newly wrested from the Turks. And this it was that on 20 August 1781, some one thousand Swedes left Hiiumaa for the last time. After a long hard winter travelling across Europe, the colonists arrived at the place near the Dnepr river that would become their home. Almost half the party had died along the way.

“Nu våra ve rätt narrander” (How we were fooled!) are reported to have been the first words of the new arrivals. The land was very different from that which they had left behind in Hiiumaa. The majority of the settlers perished during their first winter at Gammalsvenskby, and by the spring of 1783 only 135 remained, many of those suffering from ill health. But some survived, and over the ensuing years the Swedes



© Daniel Vineyard



Gammalsvenskby is part of the Ukrainian community of Zmiivka (here shown as Zmiyivka and underlined; © Collins Bartholomew Ltd; scale 1:1,500,000)

developed a viable agricultural community that maintained its Swedish cultural traditions. Neighbours arrived, first Russian monks who founded a large Orthodox monastery away to the north, and then, in about 1787, some hundreds of Germans from Gdańsk. Three German villages were created, all close to the Swedish community. The Germans called the Swedish village Altschwedendorf ('the old Swedish village').

Swedish travellers in the second half of the nineteenth century were astounded to discover this improbable outpost of Scandinavian life close to the Crimea. To those who chanced on the community, Gammalsvenskby seemed like a time warp, its inhabitants speaking a stiltedly archaic rendering of Swedish. And it was evident to visitors that German influences and traditions were beginning to find expression in the Swedes of Gammalsvenskby. Insofar as the Lutherans in the area could find a pastor to preach to them at all, it was usually a German one.

Gammalsvenskby survived wars, crop failures, Russification and emigration to Canada. By the nineteen twenties pressure on land prompted the creation of daughter settlements: Nysvenskby and Svenskaker. But by 1928, the Sovietisation of life and culture had reached even the banks of the Dnepr, and in June of that year, the entire community voted to abandon Gammalsvenskby and move to Sweden.

It took a year to make the necessary arrangements, and in July 1929 the Gammalsvenskby Swedes climbed into boats and were taken down river to the regional city of Kherson, whence a Turkish coal freighter transported them across the Black Sea to Constanța in Romania. The journey to Sweden took over a week. From Romania they went by train through the Balkans and on to Germany, for the packet steamer across the Baltic to Sweden. When they stepped off the boat at Trelleborg on Sweden's south coast, these new arrivals entered a foreign land, a place none of them had ever visited, populated by a people with which they had little in common beyond a fading similarity in language.

Within just a few weeks, some of the Gammalsvenskby community decided to return home. Others continued westward to Canada, settling in Wetaskiwin in Alberta and at Meadows in Manitoba. A significant number of those who remained in Sweden were given land on the island of Gotland.

Those Gammalsvenskby folk who returned to their Dnepr homeland were followed over the years by many Swedish communists who saw in Gammalsvenskby the possibility of realising a new order of society. Gammalsvenskby became Röda Svenskby, but famine and purges soon dented the idealism of the settlers. Nevertheless they stayed, and there they remain today.

Modern day Zmiivka incorporates Gammalsvenskby and the three former German set-

getting to Gammalsvenskby

The nearest railway stations to Gammalsvenskby, all on the same rail route, are at Kozats'ke (Козацьке), Electromash (Електромаш), and Nova Kakhovka. All three are about thirty kilometres from Gammalsvenskby. There are regular bus services from Nova Kakhovka to Beryslav (Берислав). From Beryslav, a riverside town on the Dnepr with impressive ruins of Turkish fortifications, a taxi on to Gammalsvenskby takes just twenty minutes.

For devotees of unusual town and village names, Electromash is surely a name to be cherished alongside such gems as the diabolical village of Hell in Norway and the suggestive hamlet of Intercourse in Alabama. This small railway station is at the south end of the Dnepr river dam, but buses crossing north across the dam to Beryslav may not necessarily stop here.

lements of Schlangendorf, Mülhausendorf and Klosterdorf. Old women with expressive faces cluster around the village's one shop as strangers drive into town. There is little that is Scandinavian about the shop. An out of date calendar hangs on the wall. It has a scene of wild roses edging fields of ripe grain. It could be Ukraine, but for the large red barn. The picture is of southern Sweden. We buy more melon, and walk through the village. Simple homes, with picket fences. White cottages with blue doors. A bus shelter in blue and yellow speaks of a loyalty to a Ukraine now brimming with national consciousness. Or does it? For Sweden itself uses an identical blue and yellow colour scheme to badge its identity.

Back near the shop, an old woman carrying an enormous load on her back pauses to rest. Others, standing in the dust by the road, watch her. Some, like Anna Annas and Lilly Hansas swap a few words in Swedish. A dust devil gathers pace along the main street, whips up some pieces of litter as it passes the old Swedish church, and the white geese run for cover. The cloud of dust evaporates into the hazy sunshine, and the matrushka struggles to pick up the great sack she has been carrying. She utters a few words: "Låt ditt rike komma. Låt din vilja ske." Barring some intervention, divine or otherwise, in another generation it is unlikely that anyone in Gammalsvenskby will still know the Lord's Prayer in Swedish.

Svenskbyborna Society

CONTEXT

The Svenskbyborna Society is committed to perpetuating the memory of the Gammalsvenskby tradition, and in particular that of the families which travelled from the Dnepr River to Sweden in July 1929 (www.svenskbyborna.com). Our special thanks to Åke Utas, webmaster of the Society's homepage, for assisting us in obtaining the pictures on pages 1 and 43. The Society is active in Gotland and in Canada, where it meets in both Wetaskiwin and Meadows. On 1 August each year, the anniversary of the date on which the 1929 returnees from Gammalsvenskby first set foot on Swedish



a memorial plaque in Swedish to one of Gammalsvenskby's deceased Swedish residents. The text reads: "Our Emma Malmas, 1918–2001, who with great personal charisma kept the Christian faith, the Swedish language and Swedish traditions. Thank you very much!" (photo by Kjell Knutas)

soil, a memorial service and reunion takes place in the small village of Roma in central Gotland. Next year, a group of Canadian descendents of the Gammalsvenskby Swedes plan to visit their Ukrainian roots, and in 2009, the eightieth anniversary of the 1929 return to Sweden, a jubilee festival is scheduled for Roma in Gotland.

hidden europe is grateful to Jörgen Hedman, author of several articles on Swedish emigration to the Black Sea region. A very detailed English language research paper by Jörgen can be found on the website of the Svenskbyborna Society. We also drew on an excellent account by Valentin Tinnis, whose father was born in Gammalsvenskby in 1899. Valentin's parents and grandparents were among those who left Gammalsvenskby in 1929. His maternal grandmother, Maria Annas, died on the journey to Sweden. She was buried in Kherson before the rest of the party boarded the steamship *Firuzan* for the voyage across the Black Sea to Romania. ■

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