

# SVENSKBYBORNA

FROM GAMMELSVENSKBY IN UKRAINE 1781 -1929 AND SOMEONE WHO CAN TELL THEIR INCREDIBLE STORY

**Nobody in Sweden knew anything about the "Svenskbyborna" until a Swedish-Finnish priest "discovered" this group of Swedes near the River Dnieper around 1850. Slowly their fascinating story unfolded and a contact between Sweden and Gammel-svenskby - the Old Swedish village in Ukraine was established.**

Some aid packages were sent in the dirty 20s and finally in 1929 this group of Swedes, whose ancestors had left Sweden in the 13th century, were repatriated back to the old country.

Most of the Svenskbybor stayed on in Sweden, many of them in Roma on the Baltic island of Gotland. A few returned to Ukraine. And one group made a move to Canada where a small Gammel-svenskby was set up in Manitoba in 1930.

It was some time after 1228 that about 30 families from Swedish Nyland in Finland, were lured by the promise of land and, moved to Dagö near the coast of Estonia. Dagö was controlled by the German Order until Sweden annexed it in 1622 during a period of expansion and gave it to the De la Gardie family. The prosperous farmers of Dagö were bewildered when they were suddenly expected to pay taxes and work for the new owners.



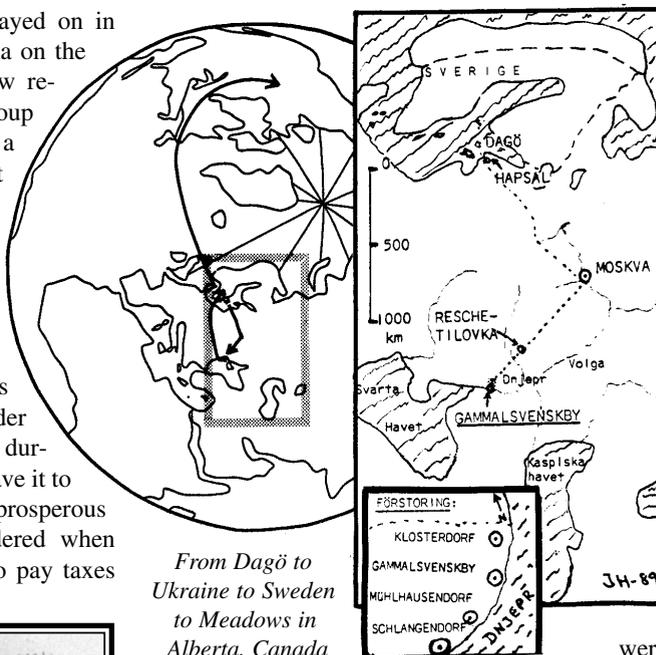
*Mikas-Simas farm on Dagö*

A hundred and fifty years of legal battles between the farmers and the De la Gardie family ensued until Sweden lost the island and the new owner, Catherine the Great of Russia, decided to move the troublesome farmers. In an imperial order, the Dagö Swedes were ordered to move to the newly colonized Ukraine. The farmers refused to budge until a Russian bureaucrat sweetened the deal, promising each family 65 hectares

of land, four tax-free years, housing etc etc.

Two hundred families left Dagö for Ukraine on August 20, 1781. Fewer than half of the group survived the 1 200 mile long journey. Illness and the treacherous Russian winter took their toll. When the survivors finally arrived at the promised land of milk and honey, the first sentence that was uttered, according to hearsay, was "Nu vaere ve raet naraner" - *Nu blev vi allt lurade* or Now we have really been had.

Some terrible years followed. In 1783 only 150 of the original 1207 people who had left Dagö remained. They were not even



*From Dagö to Sweden to Meadows in Alberta, Canada*

able to maintain the land they were given and soon found three German Mennonite settlements on their property. In 1790 the population of Swedes was given a boost by addition of the families Norberg and Harnberg that had been taken as prisoners during Russia's war against Gustaf III of Sweden.

Eventually the lot of the Swedes improved and by the time World War I broke out Gammel-svenskbyn (or Altschwedendorf or Staroschwedskaja, as it was known in German and Ukrainian respectively) was doing quite well. There was a lack of land but not a lack of wealth. The isolation had been broken and the village had frequent contact with Swedes in Sweden and Finland.



*Johan Mattson Buskas' farm in Gammel-svenskby in Ukraine*

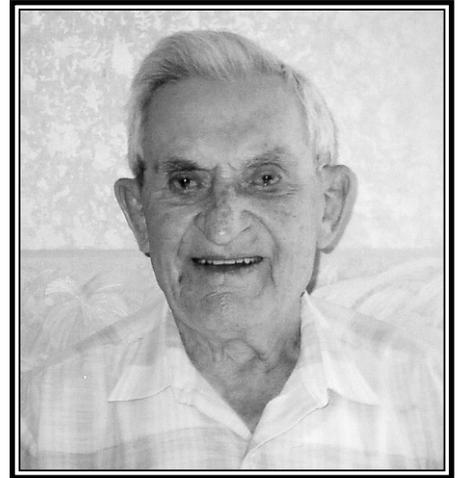
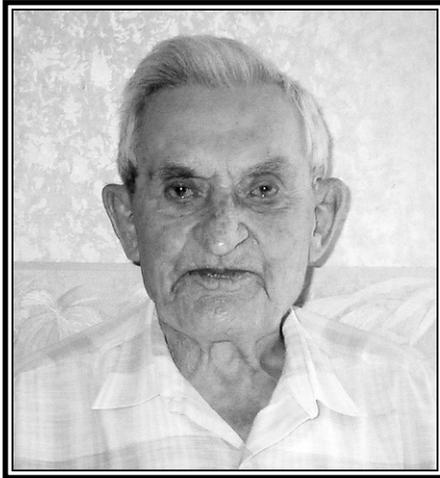
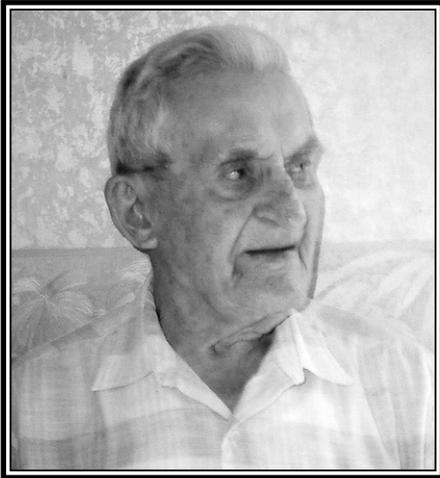
However this period of relative prosperity ended after the Russian Revolution. The Svenskbybor were regarded with a great deal of suspicion. There was pressure on the villagers to become more "stalinized". The proud Swedes were having nothing of that and at a gathering there was a unanimous vote to press for the right to emigrate to Sweden. This did not sit well with the Soviet authorities but they finally gave in to an official demand from Swedish authorities. In July of 1929 Gammel-svenskby was deserted and the mass emigration was a reality.

The reception in Sweden was not all positive and actually 240 of the Svenskbybor returned to Ukraine where they got their houses back. But many of the men in the group "disappeared" or were sent to Siberia.

The 625 who stayed on in Sweden did well, not the least because they were used to hard work. The majority settled on farms on Gotland while a third are to be found in Småland and Västergötland.

A group of 70 Svenskbybor moved to Canada. John Hoas is one of the last survivors of this group and of a dramatic and fascinating part of Swedish history. He has lived under the rules of Tsar Nikolaus II, Lenin, Stalin, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, Queen Elizabeth II and various Canadian Prime Ministers.

Born and grown up in a small village in southern Ukraine and having lived in Sweden for all of 11 months, John Hoas still proudly calls himself Swedish. He has spoken Swedish all his life. The Swedish he speaks today is not hard to understand. That was probably not true for the Swedish he spoke as a child as this was practically



**John Hoas from Gammel-Svenskby in Ukraine** has lived under the rules of Tsar Nikolaus II, Lenin, Stalin, Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden, Queen Elizabeth II and various Canadian Prime Ministers:

*“In Russia we could not even figure out how a man could ride a bike.”*

Viking Swedish with certain influences from other languages like German, Estonian and Russian.

John Hoas still lives on the “Gammel-svenskby” farm, that his family was one of the founders of, in Meadow, Manitoba with his two sons and their families.

This interview was done in August 2005.

## Interview:

**Swedish Press: What do you remember of your life in Gammelsvenskby in Ukraine?**

John Hoas: We were a few families, most people had the same family names. We were all Albers, Annas, Buskas, Hansas, Jarman, Hamberg, Hinas, Hoas, Knutas, Koppers, Kotz, Larsas, Malmas, Martis, Mutas, Norberg, Serges, Sigalet, Takne, Tinis or Utas. The name Hoas came from Hoagården. Or Malmas, my wife was born Malmas, comes from the word “malm”. The svenskbybor were the first ones in the south Ukraine. It was wilderness there. When they got their cattle, they had to kill wolves all the time so they would not lose all their livestock. Katarina the Great was the ruler at that time and she welcomed them with open arms and she had given them a beautiful spot along the river. We had apricots, peaches, pears and luscious grapes grew all year round. It was a little like Florida. But three years after the Svenskbybor came the Germans moved in too. They took over the villages one after the other. They had teachers with them and ministers and the German minister had said you Swedes might as well

start working with the Germans. But the Swedes were stubborn and said they were Swedes and were going to stay Swedish. Then they started building their own church. They had already saved up enough rubles and then they got a donation from Sweden. It is a beautiful church, solid stone, well built. And the marble finish inside is something else and it seated 500 people. Then the Germans built a church and they built the same type of church. There were a few intermarriages and my grandmother’s grandmother was German. When we were in the village it was all Swedish but when we left the village we either had to speak Russian or German. We had Swedish school one day and the next day it was Russian. When you went to the city it was all Russian. When the Revolution broke out, they took away the religion in the schools. My education was nil because of the Revolution. When we left the village was empty. They destroyed the buildings and the beautiful trees and the fruit orchards.

**SP: How did your repatriation to Sweden come about?**

JH: The Russians did not want us to leave. They took us in one by one and promised to give us everything. But everybody said they wanted to go home. When the day came that we were to leave they sent two small boats along the river. We got on these boats and then at the coast in Cherson there was an old Turkish coal freighter that came in. The Swedish government had made an agreement with Italy to send in an Italian passenger boat but the Russians said they

did not have anything to do with Italy and they would not let them in. We could not speak to one another and the guy was watching us with a finger on the trigger. They searched all of us. And you know the ladies had their long hair braided up and they searched through it. By the time we got on the boat it was getting late already and they had a small tugboat to lead the ocean boat through the Black Sea and the ocean boat was led right into a concrete bank and that ripped a hole in the front. But they said nothing and they blocked the hole up with cement bags. We were on the boat one night and one day and >>>

*“By the time we got on the boat it was getting late already and they had a small tugboat to lead the ocean boat through the Black Sea.”*

