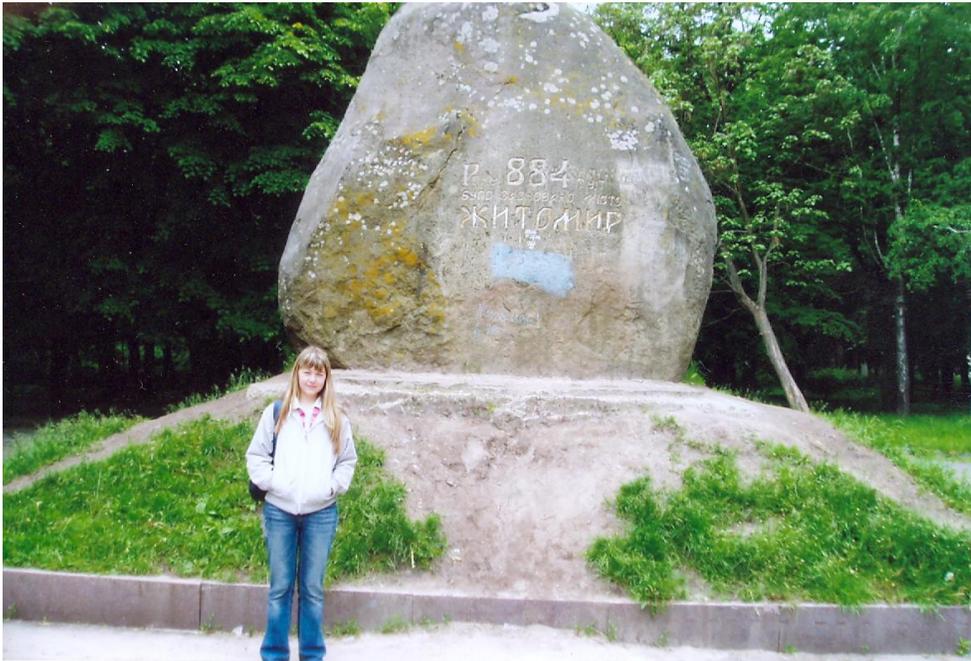


BOLSHEVIKS ON THE STREETS OF ZHITOMIR

by
Donald N. Miller

For over a decade now I have been leading tours to Ukraine to help people find their ancestral roots. Included in the *Volhynian Village Adventure Tour* is a three-hour tour of the city of Zhitomir, called *the Bolshevik Tour*. Admittedly, the nomenclature is something of a misnomer, inasmuch as it includes much more than a visitation of those sites that have significance for Germans as they relate to the Bolsheviks. But still we call it that, partly for its dramatic affect, and partly because the two really are quite closely intertwined at many points. Over the years there were many Bolsheviks on the streets of Zhitomir.

1. Our tours begins on **Castle Hill** on the banks of the Kamenka River where the ancient city of Zhitomir was founded in 884 AD by some Slavic tribes. Originally, a wooden protective fortress, including a castle, was located on the high granite rocks overlooking the river. The castle was one of the largest in the region. It was armed with four cannons and five guns. It was attacked many times by its enemies, including the Poles who arrived in Volhynia in 1556 AD. It was finally conquered and destroyed in 1852 by Russian troops. At this point Zhitomir spread out in the southeastern and northern directions and entered the “New World.” Today a 70-ton boulder located across the street from the former Market Square marks the place where the city began. There is also an old **Town Council** building nearby, an architectural relic of the early 19th C., and some stone underground tunnels, which the ancients used to escape from their enemies.



Huge stone marking founding of city, 884 AD

2. The area is significant for Germans in that many Germans lived on the **Kamenka River Embankment** in the 1930s after they fled to Zhitomir in the face of the Bolshevik repression. Eduard A. Hornbacher, pastor of the German Baptist Church in Iwanowitsch, was among the many who tried to hide away from the NKWD (secret police) in this place. He worked in the nearby brick factory as a handyman until, like most, he was eventually tracked down, arrested and sent to a Gulag, though many were also shot. It is also significant that in the 1870s a German mill founded on the left bank of the Kamenka River was re-equipped to house the famous brewery of the local Czech merchants, Machacek and Jans. It is still functioning today and is one of the oldest enterprises in the city and famous for its beer all over Europe.



Kamenka River Embankment Settlement of Germans

No one will say for sure how the city got its name, but there are several legends, conjectures and versions that have been passed along by the keepers of national history. One is that the city was named after an army colonel by the name of Zhitomir. Another comes from the etymology of the word itself. The conjunction of the two words, *Zhito* (rye) and *mir* (peace), conjures up the picture of a peaceful field of rye. But whatever the historical meaning of the name, Zhitomir used to be a western outpost of Kiev, called “the mother of Russian towns.”

3. As we proceed down Kafedraina Street we come to **Soborna Square**, the entrance to the old city 200 years ago. Today it is called Lenin Square. As we pass the former regional Communist Party building, we come to Lenin’s statue, which was erected in 1957. Though most statues of Lenin have been destroyed in Ukraine, this one remains, perhaps because of its historical tie to Lenin’s grandfather, Israel Blank, who was born in the small Volhynian town of Starokonstyantyniv and later lived in Zhitomir. According to archival evidence, Blank was a well-known doctor of Jewish nationality, who was baptized in the

Russian Orthodox Church in Zhitomir and changed his name to Vladamir Blank. In the course of time he was named an honorary citizen of Zhitomir. Though the statue is part of the State Registry and cannot be removed by law, it is a symbol of destruction and death to most Germans visiting the city today. It only brings back sad memories of families who lost their farms during the collectivization period, loved ones who starved to death during the *Great Famine* in 1932-1933, fathers who were arrested in the dead of night in the mid-1930s and never returned, and hundreds upon thousands who were falsely accused of “anti-soviet agitation” and shot to death by the NKWD during the *Great Terror* in 1937.



Lenin statue in front of the former Communist Headquarters

When the Germans arrived in Zhitomir in 1941, they built many shops and business enterprises on the Square. Unfortunately, during the liberation of Zhitomir in 1943, the Square was totally destroyed by the Soviets in their attempt to knock out the Germans. Not a single house or business facility remained around Soborna Square. After the liberation of Zhitomir on December 31, 1943, it took 15 years to raise the Square from its ruins and rebuild the city. In 1957 one of the first majestic buildings to arise was that of the former Communist Party Committee, surrounded by the dwelling places of the Party bosses. It was not until the 60s that the first *Khrushchovkas*, the grey, nondescript flats, were built for the working people.

4. As we turn right on to Tschernichovskyy Street, formerly Andriyvska Street, we come to the *Potato House*, a modern-day fast food restaurant, located on the corner where the **Dorn Hotel** once stood. The Dorn Hotel was owned by a German by its name's sake and operated as a guesthouse, restaurant and overnight stable for the German farmers coming to the big city from the surrounding villages. The hotel was destroyed in 1943 during the liberation of Zhitomir. My family recalls frequenting the hotel on many occasions. Dorn was

arrested in the 30s and lost his business, and according to some sources, his mind as well.



*The Old Soborno Square, now Lenin Square, where the Dorn Hotel once stood.
(bottom left hand corner)*

5. A few meters down the road on the right-hand side we come to the **Dopra Prison**. It was originally built as a Jesuit Seminary and Monastery in 1724. However in 1794-95, when Volhynia became part of the Russian Empire, the Tsar closed the seminary and in 1809 it became a trade school. It was there in 1816-1820 that the grandfather of the Bolshevik leader, Ulyaniov Lenin, studied. Later, it became a prison of forced labor for small time thieves, thugs and prostitutes until 1914 when a new prison was built on the outskirts of the city. In the 1930s the building was used by the Bolsheviks as an overflow facility for the many Germans who were arrested during the repression. Several of my family members, including Heinrich Mueller and Amelia Streichert, were interned in the dismal quarters.



Dobra Prison, formerly a Jesuit Seminary

6. Proceeding down what was **Andriyvaska Street**, just past the Polish Cultural Center, we come to another area where many Germans lived during the 1930s until their retreat with the German Army in November 1943. There were a lot of German troops located in the barracks at the end of the street. My family, who lived on this very street, recalls hearing the German soldiers sing at night, which was very comforting to them. Several years ago, while making a search for any remaining German houses, I found my grandfather's house, that of Michael Mueller. It was the only remaining house of the Germans. It was on this street, House No. 79, that Heinrich Mueller, his son, was arrested in the early hours of the morning on June 25, 1937. Mueller sat in the Zhitomir prison for several months, then was rushed through a "fake trial" and within days shot by firing squad on November 21, 1937.



Road toward the German settlement on Andriyvaska Street in the 1930s



House where Michael Mueller, grandfather of Don Miller, lived in Zhitomir

7. Almost directly across the street from the Polish Cultural Center, perched high on a hill, is the **Monument of Glory**, including an eternal flame, built in honor of the Zhitomir liberators. The memorial was built on solid granite rock to a height of 35 meters and weighed 16 tons. When the Germans took the city on July 9, 1941, they thought they would stay forever and therefore did little damage to the city. In their optimism of the future, they also planned for a resettlement of Germans outside the city, where they established a headquarters for Hitler and Himmler. It is reported that Hitler himself frequently visited the headquarters (also a retreat center for Hitler), in his desire to create “a clean environment” for

the development of the future German colonies in Ukraine. Today it serves as a military cemetery for the heroes of the German Army



Monument of Glory built on granite boulders of the Teteriv River



Eternal Flame at the Memorial Monument



Military Cemetery for the heroes of the German Army

Apart from the fact that many young people, especially young women, were forced to go to Germany and work in factories and on farms, life went on pretty much as usual when the Germans took over. There was little repression against the Zhitomir citizens until local partisans, with the aid of Moscow, tried to undermine the Germans. The Germans responded by hanging citizens in Saborna Square on the place where the theater now stands. Most of the

damage that Zhitomir suffered during the war occurred when the Soviets tried to retake the city in 1943. Initially, they failed when they used horse battalions. But later, with mass bombing and the use of heavy artillery, located on the banks of the Teteriv River, they finally succeeded, though the liberation took an entire year.

8. As we return to the old city at the crossroads of Puskin and Admirala Stchastnogo Streets, we are struck by the stately **Water Tower** designed by Zhitomir's chief architect (a German), Arnold Jentsch in 1896/1897. During the Bolshevik period it was used as an observation tower. Later, it was again used as a water tower until 1960. It now projected to become a restaurant.



Old Water Tower designed in the late 1800s by the German architect Jentsch

9. Proceeding north on Stary Boulevard, we come to the **Monument of Pushkin**, built in 1891, and the memorial gravestone of Vasily Bozhenko at the entrance to Walking Street. During the Civil War from 1917 – 1920, which followed World War I, the power in Zhitomir changed 14 times. In the process, many historical and cultural memorials were desecrated and destroyed. On August 19, 1919, the dead Bolshevik Comrade Vasily Bozhenko, according to his dying wish, was buried near the monument to Pushkin. To maintain the solemnity of the funeral, the Brigade commander's comrades-in-arms, broke the family vault of Baron de-Chaudoir, who had been buried in the Lutheran cemetery not long before. The remains of the hated "class enemy" were thrown out and Bozhenko's dead body was placed into the coffin and buried near Pushkin's monument. But the next day the town was occupied by the opposing

side, which knocked out the Bolsheviks and at the same time returned the coffin and its remains to the cemetery. Today there is a monument near Pushkin's statue with the inscription that the Civil War hero was buried there.



Monument to Pushkin unveiled in 1899

10. From here we enter **Rady Square** and the old Regional State Administrative Building where many of the German prisoners were interrogated during the repression in the 1930s. Here you will also see the imposing statue of Sergiy Korolyov, the legendary chief designer of the first spacecraft to circle the earth. Korolyov was born in Zhitomir on January 12, 1907. He was the founder of the first scientific design school in the field of rocket building, which ultimately led to *Sputnik* and Yuriy Gagarin, the first satellite and man in space. Due to the severe secrecy and pathological peculiarities of the Soviet regime, Korolyov's name and his creative genius was not revealed until after his death in 1966.



Regional State Administrative Building, 1930s

11. Proceeding to Michajlovskja Street, now popularly known as *Walking Street*, we come to what was once **Karl Schadel's Sweet Shop**, one of several well-known German shops in Zhitomir. The confectionery was opened sometime after the Revolution and remained open until the late 1920s/early 1930s when it was closed by the Bolsheviks. The building now serves as a theater.



Walking Street near Schadel's Sweet Shop

12. Continuing on our tour in the northerly direction of the city, we pass the old **Prosecutor's building**. It is here that the destiny of thousands of Germans, as well as Poles, Jews and Ukrainians, was decided by the *troika*, a special three-man committee of the secret police in the 1930s, which had absolute power over the life and death of an individual. The illegal court was comprised of the head of the regional secret service, the Communist Party boss and the chief prosecutor.



Prosecutor's Building used during the Repression of Germans

13. From here it is only a short drive to the majestic monument on near Putjatin Square dedicated to the victims of the **Great Famine** of 1932 – 1933, in which some seven million Ukrainians starved to death, including many Germans. It was long suspected that the famine was deliberately engineered by the Bolsheviks to break the back of the Ukrainian people. Now it can be reported that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has published a collection of Soviet government documents confirming the planned and genocidal nature of the famine conducted against an innocent people.



Memorial to the 1932 – 1933 starvation victims

14. We then pass the old **Secret Service building**, which has alternately served as the headquarters for the Cheka, the GPU, the NKWD (and from 1941 to 1943 the German Gestapo), followed by the KGB and today the SBU. The building was constructed in 1912 and originally owned by the Land Bank. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they took over some of the best buildings in town, including many banks, churches and museums. This building was among those confiscated.



Secret Service Building, place of execution

In the 1930s, most notably during the *Great Terror* in 1937-1938, the building was used as an interrogation center, prison facility and execution chamber for the Germans (and others) arrested for so-called anti-soviet activity. When the Germans occupied the city and seized the building, they found thousands of personal files and secret documents attesting to the atrocities perpetrated on innocent victims of the Zhitomir region. Victims were shot two minutes apart in the back of the head, then loaded on a truck in the basement and dumped in a mass grave nearby. A second building, adjoining the first, was constructed in the 1960s.

15. Proceeding down the street on the “**Road to Death**,” we come to a ravine, now housing a dismal collection of old storage sheds. It was once the ancient site of the suburban village of Popovka (near the old Jewish cemetery), a settlement of the *Old Believers* of Russia. It was here that the Bolsheviks dumped their victims in a ditch and covered them with dirt. In the 1970s when the Communist Government was considering the construction of an apartment complex on the banks of the ravine, they made a haunting discovery. Mixed in with the dirt and debris excavated were human jawbones, skeletons and entire skulls. It was then that it was discovered that they had dug into a mass grave of human remains. Construction was stopped, the builders were dismissed and the remains were hauled away and buried.



Location of mass graves discovered in the 1970s

16. At this point it is necessary to walk to the next site, the **Memorial Garden**, which is the place of burial in the northwest corner of the Jewish cemetery on Berdichev Street. Here a large cross, made by the Orthodox Church, has been erected as a memorial for the victims of the repression. A brass plaque at the base of the cross, loosely translated, reads: *We remember, we grieve, we ask for forgiveness of the innocent victims who were annihilated by the Communist Bolshevik regime in 1937-1938. From the citizens of Zhitomir.*



Memorial Garden commemorating the death of innocent victims

17. From the Memorial Garden, we proceed to Lutheran Street, now bearing the name of the well-known Ukrainian writer, Mikhailo Kostyubynsky. Here we come to the **German Lutheran Church**, which was established in the Zhitomir region in 1801. After occupying several private houses, the Lutheran community, under the leadership of Heinrich Martin David Wasem, constructed a beautiful modernized Gothic style building in 1896. It was designed by Arnold Jentsch, who two years later, designed and built the Water Tower on Pushkinska Street.



Old German Lutheran Church

For many years, the gifted musician and tuner, Daniel Richter, a German and the grandfather of the world famous pianist, Svyatoslav Richter, played the church organ. On November 20, 1933, Gustav Uhle, the last pastor, was picked up by the secret police and accused of having ties to the Fascist Party in Germany, engaging in espionage and being involved in various subversive activities. He was sentenced to five year in a Gulag in Kazakhstan. In 1937 he was located around Pecora in the Republic of Komi. He was re-arrested in 1941 and never heard from again. His wife, Olga, and sister, Berta, were both executed in 1937 on similar charges.



House on Velyka Berdychivska Street in which Svyatoslav Richter was born

In 1941, after the invasion of the German Army, Samuel Lemke was installed as pastor of the church. During his tenure of service, until the retreat of the army, he kept extensive records, resulting in over 7,000 entries of birth, marriage, baptism and death. After the war the church was transformed into the Dynamo Gymnasium, an athletic club for staffers of the NKWD. In 1990 the building was returned to the religious community. It is now the property of the Evangelical Christian Baptists. A small community of Lutherans, less than a 100 people, again regularly meet in the building.

18. We come now to 51 Chlebnaja Street, near the Sinny Market, where the **German Baptist Church** was located from its founding in 1907 to 1937. On December 1, 1930, Robert R. Petasch, the pastor, was arrested while on denominational business in Odessa, the Baptist headquarters. He was accused of "spreading secret information, conducting anti-soviet work, engaging in espionage activity and having connections with the Baptist Union in America." He was brought to trial six months later and banished to the North for five years. He was never heard from again. Following his exile, Albert Buss, a deacon, tried to hold things together as best he could until Eduard Hornbacher arrived and took over the church. The church was closed down by the Bolsheviks in 1937, just before Christmas. It was the last of many churches to be closed in the Zhitomir region.



Baptist Church Choir, 1934. Heinrich Mueller (back row, right) shortly before his arrest

19. From here we proceed to the location of the former **Communist Home for Children** on the corner of Procherov and Alexander Streets where the German Baptist Church met during the German occupation of Zhitomir from 1941 to 1943. The church was again served by Eduard Hornbacher, who had returned from exile only a few days before Hitler invaded Russia. During this time Hornbacher made a strong impact on the spiritual lives of the remaining Germans in Zhitomir and the surrounding area, baptizing hundreds in the Teteriv River on a single Sunday, mostly young people. The building no longer exists. In its place is a small park.



German Baptist Church from 1941 to 1943 during German occupation

20. Our next stop is at the **Zhitomir Railroad Station** on Vokzalnaja Street on the way to Kiev. In 1895 a small wooden railway station was built to accommodate the first narrow gauge tracks laid from Berdyshev to Zhitomir. Initially, the trains clocked 16 km/hr. and stopped at any place on the railway to pick up passengers. In 1914 the narrow gauge line was replaced by a broad gauge one and the railroad was extended to Koreston. After the wooden train station burned down in 1913 a new stone structure was built. The stone structure still exists today. The stations are significant in that it was from these two stations that thousands of Germans immigrated to Canada and the United States over the years, were shipped to Siberia and fled to the remote corners of the earth to escape the repression. A new station was built in 1971.



Railroad Station from which thousands of Germans went to their death

21. From the Railroad Station we proceeded to Vatutina Street to the **Zhitomir prison**, which was built in 1914. It was here that both men and women were housed during the 1930s in the most over-crowded conditions impossible. According to reports, the prison was designed to hold approximately 1,200 prisoners, but the Bolsheviks crammed some 30,000 into it in the height of the repression. Since each prisoner had a space of less than three feet square there was standing room only. Many prisoners, Germans among them, were common, ordinary people, who became sick and died in anonymity.



Prison where thousands of Germans were imprisoned

22. Finally, we drive in the northwesterly direction to the outskirts of the city to the **Polish Cemetery** located on Korolenko Street. The 200 year-old cemetery has a German section in it, which includes the remains of a Lutheran chapel. Here, among other famous and well-known Germans, Heinrich Wasem, the pioneer pastor of the Lutheran Church in Volhynia, is buried. Known and respected by virtually every German Lutheran immigrant, Pastor Wasem had witnessed the birth of almost every village in Volhynia. Most of the early birth, marriage and death certificates brought over to America had his name on them. During Soviet times the German cemetery was abandoned and was eventually turned into a garbage heap. Today, the cemetery remains largely unattended.



Old Polish Cemetery with German Lutheran Section

Despite the devastation that the city of Zhitomir has suffered over the years and its deprivation by the Soviet Powers, it remains one of the most interesting and historic cities in the entire Ukraine. And the Germans are part of its past. For many years, the German connection to the Bolsheviks was shrouded in secrecy. Only after the Declaration of Independence of Ukraine in 1991 from the Soviet Union can historians and journalists bravely and honestly tell about these facts.

Credit Courtesy: I am indebted to Georgiy Mokritsky, well-known resident of Zhitomir and honorable journalist of Ukraine, for much of the historical data contained in this article, as well as for many of the photos. -- Donald N. Miller (2007)