

Finding Roots in Crimea

by Merv Weiss



Meeting Konstantin

In May 2005, I visited Crimea with Robert Schneider LLC Tours. One of my objectives was to visit the site of my mother's birthplace—Anakoi-Eli, a small village which no longer exists. I had previously found few references to the name of this village as it appears on my mother's Russian birth certificate, and I had found no one who could tell me where it was located. All I knew was that my mother's family left Crimea in December 1924. But Valya Fromm of Mykolaiv (who works with Robert Schneider), in cooperation with Simferopol Archives, found the geographical coordinates for the former village of Anakoi-Eli. Valya began phoning to the offices of nearby villages to locate someone who might remember Anakoi-Eli. And that is how I came to meet Konstantin Ponomarenko, who lives today in Tsvitochne, about thirty-five kilometres east and north of Simferopol.



Konstantin Ponomarenko, 2005—decorated Defender of Stalingrad

Konstantin, too, was born in Anakoi-Eli, in 1921, and lived there until he began his studies at a technical school in 1936. The village was a mixture of Germans, Russians, and Tatars. He said the Germans were known to be intelligent and hard-working. His best friend in the village was a German, Joseph Fullman [Vollman], who also served in the Soviet army, but Konstantin never heard what happened to him. Konstantin is a much decorated Soviet war hero, defender of Stalingrad, wounded four times. He was so excited to meet me, his family said, that he did not eat or sleep for three days prior to our arrival. Very agile, mentally and physically, Konstantin jumped on our bus and gave the driver directions.

First he wanted to show us the abandoned collective farm, where he and his wife had worked for many years. It was formerly the property of a wealthy German family named "Dick." He pointed out the ruins of many buildings and what they were used for. The estate had a large cattle and livestock operation, had many grain storage buildings, had beautiful orchards, ran a very large bee and honey operation, and had several hot-houses, one of which was built as the second storey of the honey warehouse. There was a large tobacco factory nearby, and I remembered our family history which said one of Grandmother's brothers was a tobacco-cutter. I also remembered being told that after he returned from service in the Tsar's army during World War I, Grandfather Schafer worked on a large farm. This was likely the one.

We drove across the Burul'cha River at a clear, shallow gravel bed and climbed up the east bank. On the edge of a large barley field, he told the driver to stop, and Konstantin was the first one off the bus. He fell down on hands and knees and kissed the earth. Tears ran down his cheek and he hugged me. Here, overlooking the Burul'cha River, was the former site of the village of Anakoi-Eli, which was leveled in the late 1940s. But Konstantin pointed out where the houses once stood, where the school was, the cemetery, the town well, etc. To the south, one could see the rise of the Crimean Mountains on the Yalta coast. This was the view my Grandfather had every morning. At one point, I showed him a copy of my mother's birth certificate, written in Russian. As he read the title, he became very excited. Inna Stryukova, our interpreter, related that Konstantin said his father was the administrator of the nearby municipal village where my mother's birth was recorded. When he came to the bottom of the page, he began to cry—there, on my mother's birth certificate, was his father's signature. It was a stunning moment for the entire tour group.

Konstantin had brought along a present for me. It was a large folded wall map, paper bonded onto canvas, of Germany, printed in the Russian language in 1939. It was the map he used to find his way around Germany during World War II. In return, I asked Konstantin if there was anything I could do for him. I was expecting perhaps he could use some cash for medicines or something to fix his house. Instead, he told me about a book he



Konstantin kissing the soil of Anakoi-Eli—(Photo courtesy Jim Messer)

had written of his experiences during the war years. He very much wanted to get it typed and printed so that he could give copies to his family and friends, including some comrades who were still alive. The book is based on the daily diary which he kept during the war, and which he had with him to show us. The book contains many poems he had written during those years.

When I agreed to help, he took us to his home, and produced four school-type notebooks, beautifully hand-written. Inna read a few pages and said the grammar and sentence structure was perfect. The book turned out to be just over 400 typed pages. He now has the entire book, poems and cover photograph, in hard-copy and on a CD. The original “manuscript” has also been returned to him. It was my pleasure to help him, small recompense for the pleasure I received from spending



Konstantin dancing with Millie Halsey of South Dakota—(Photo courtesy Jim Messer)

a mere two or three hours with this intelligent, articulate and emotional man, who was so excited to meet us and tell us about his life. He recited his poetry from memory, and he danced with Millie Halsey (another tour member) because he liked beautiful women! I can only wish for that much energy when I am eighty-four years old.

Shortly after I returned home on June 10, I wrote Konstantin to thank him for his present and for guiding our tour group to Anakoi-Eli. I included several pictures taken during our visit with him and also some photos of my family. He immediately answered by way of the following letter. The letter was translated from Russian to English by Inna Stryukova of Mykolaiv.

Konstantin's First Letter

28 June 2005

My dear village compatriot,

I am sending you warm regards from sunny Crimea. All these days I live with the impressions our meeting made on me. My children, grandchildren and friends also send their greetings to you.

I will tell you a little about myself. My parents had four children. Their daughter, Olympiade, was born in 1914. She was eighty-two years old when she died; she was single and did not have any children. My elder brother, Sasha, born 1917, was killed in the war in 1941. [There is also a younger brother, Victor, who lives in Yalta.] I was born in 1921; I finished secondary school and communication technical school. Before the war I worked as a head of the post-office. In 1940, I was drafted into the army. I am a war veteran; I was wounded four times. God saved me; I remained alive. I got married after I returned home from the front. My wife's name was Zoya; we had three children. Our elder daughter, Natusha, has a daughter who is a dentist and is single; and a son who is a driver. He is married and has a child. My son Sasha was born in 1950; he is married and has two daughters, twenty-four and seventeen. My younger daughter, Lucy (1950) has two sons, who are not married yet. The oldest one works in Kiev as an engineer, and the other studies at the university. He is twenty-two years old. You have met my grand-daughter who has a baby. She has been married for a year. Her name is Olga; she is a teacher. Her husband, Kostya, is a policeman—a captain.

Until 1981, my wife and I worked on the collective farm and then retired. She worked as a shop assistant and later as a cook in the kindergarten. I worked as an agronomist in the orchard; I planted fruit trees in the orchards. For many years, I was in charge of the refrigeration storage facilities. My pension was 70 rubles. At that time it was equal to \$100 USD. I worked until 1997. Unexpectedly, my wife fell ill, and I had to quit my job. Our younger daughter, Lucy, and her family moved to my house, and now we live together very friendly and peacefully. My wife Zoya was ill for four years before she died. Lucy works as an accountant; her husband Anatoly is an agronomist. We are not rich, but we are very happy. When I worked, I went to work by bicycle or by motorcycle. Two years ago, we bought a

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second-hand car, a Ford, and my son-in-law drives to his work with it. His salary is \$70 USD per month, and Lucy's is \$56 USD.

When I was younger, I often visited my comrades-in-arms in different cities which we once liberated. About ten times I had a rest in the sanatoriums. My wife Zoya, only once, traveled to Novorosiysk and spent three days there. We were busy in our backyard; we had a cow and a calf, a couple of pigs, and some poultry. So my life was always in motion and went its usual way.

Recently we have marked the sixtieth anniversary of Victory in WWII. Not many people have survived to see that day; many of my comrades-in-arms have already passed away. My dream is to have peace in the entire world.

I was on the Elbe River; we met the Americans there; they were good guys. I was in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. All the people were very nice, very kind-hearted; we shared everything with them. In Austria, I lived in a lady's home; she was very poor. She had just a cup of tea and a little salad in the morning. I brought her the food from my rations. Suddenly, her son came back from the front. We both were in Stalingrad in battle at the same time, and we fought against each other. We met at his home, and there we were, sitting at the table and drinking tea together. We talked about that terrible war which nobody needed, about our dead comrades, and we cried and laughed and were happy just to be alive.

In 1947, the division I was serving in came to Crimea. My General tried to talk me into staying in the army, but I did not agree, as I had my old parents at home. I came home and found out that they had nothing to eat, not even a piece of bread. They ate grass; they got only 200 grams of flour per day to cook *boltushka* (flour stirred in water and cooked). This, at the very time, when Berlin was conquered, Stalin sent one hundred thousand tons of meat and 200 thousand tons of flour there.

It is good that your grandparents left in 1928 [actually 1924]. In 1933, there was a famine in Crimea, Russia and Ukraine, because the crops were bad. Many people died of starvation. Everything passed, and before 1991 our country was well-to-do and strong. Now the collective farms do not function anymore, and people have to survive as they can.

That is all, my friend. Give my greetings to your wife, to your daughters, friends and all who came from Russia. Let them read this letter to you, and ask them to answer me in Russian.

Sincerely yours, Konstantin

[Konstantin had not yet received his book as of this letter, and that is why he does not mention it here. In a subsequent letter, he wrote these words: "Dear friends, I do not have enough words to express my gratitude for helping me type and publish my reminiscences. They are a tribute to all my friends—soldiers who fought at the front. I hope I will see the book published to give to the relatives of all my brother soldiers. I owe you so much. I wish you good health, happiness and prosperity. Best wishes, Konstantin." (Letter translated by Inna Stryukova of Mykolaiv)]

From Konstantin's Second Letter

[Konstantin's frustrations with the current economic conditions in Ukraine are revealed in this segment of his second letter, dated 16 August 2005. He also enclosed two photos of himself with family, both captioned as taken on Victory Day celebrations in 1998 and 2000. It reveals what life-long importance Konstantin has placed on his war experiences.]

When I was born [1921], there was a terrible famine in Russia and Ukraine. My mother told me that America had helped Russia, Ukraine and Crimea. We are so grateful for that aid. We remember it and tell every new generation about it. There was another famine in 1933. Many people died including innocent children. After the war, in 1946-1947, food was very scarce in our country. I came back home from the Front and found out my family had no bread. This is how all people suffer from war.

We came back from the Front and began to build up the economy destroyed by the war. We were happy. Our lives were improving every year. But our government made a big mistake by launching thousands of missiles to develop our military potential. Praise the Lord, the third world war did not happen. All that expensive military equipment would be of better use by turning it into scrap metal to build ploughs and combines.

In 1991, another stupid thing was done, a strange and unnecessary *perestroika* (rebuilding). Before *perestroika*, everything was well organized. We had good yields of crops. Industries were productive. Food and education were free. And then suddenly, within five to ten years, all good things achieved with such difficulty were ruined, upset and stolen. Millions of un-employed appeared in the country. It was all so stupid. And nobody is responsible for anything. It was decided to give the land to the people. But the farmers do not have the equipment to work, and they do not have the money to buy it. People lost their savings in the banks due to the devaluation of our currency. Few people want to work on the farms. The young people tend to move to the cities. The collective and state farms have been destroyed. It is not profitable to raise cattle, grow vegetables and fruit. The salaries are low and people have to go abroad to earn money. Who will grow the crops? The prices for fuel and for machines have practically killed farming. That is the result brought to us by *perestroika* and the market economy which we cannot understand. Ten percent of the population got rich, and the rest became poor and unemployed.

Commentary on Konstantin's Letters

Konstantin's comments on the 1933 famine reflect the official Soviet explanation of those years. It conveniently ignores Stalin's purposeful plan to starve the Ukrainians into submission, and the Germans who happened to live in Ukraine at the same time were caught in this scheme. Yes, the harvest was bad that year, but the colonists had had all their grains requisitioned already in 1931, so that it was punishable by death to possess even a kernel of grain or corn outside of the collective farms. The people even "re-cycled" horse and cow manure to glean the

few kernels of corn or wheat. The Soviets had taken almost all of the horses from the colonists, so that there were no horses with which to operate the farm implements. Many men had already been shot or taken to prison camps because they refused to turn over their possessions to the collective farms. Many families were without adult males, fathers or sons. No wonder the harvest was bad!

Konstantin sent me two photos of him and his family in front of war memorials on the fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries of the end of World War Two. His comments on the photos, and the fact that he chose these photos to send to me, reflect the life-long impact the war years had on him personally, and the importance he associated with victory and the war's end. Konstantin's comments about all the food being sent from the Soviet Union to Germany after the war are interesting. I would like to have this substantiated by another source. But I do not question his sincere love and support for his homeland. He is a wonderful man with a zest for life. It was a pleasure to meet another person who was born in Anakoi-Eli. He was truly thrilled to meet me. At one point he looked at me and said, "You are the only other person in the world that I know of that has a connection to Anakoi-Eli." How could I not be moved by such a man or by such a comment? We stood in the Burul'cha River together and it was an unforgettable moment. Before we parted, Konstantin kissed the hand of every lady, and he shook each man's hand.



Konstantin and Merv Weiss, Burul'cha River, Crimea, 2005, just below the former village site of Anakoi-Eli

Konstantin was, and still is, a member of the Communist Party, and did not vote for the new president, Victor Kushenko. Konstantin feels that Ukraine has gone backwards since it is no longer a part of the Soviet Union. Economically speaking, he is indeed correct. When Ukraine gained its independence from the USSR in 1991, it had to start building its own government and bureaucratic infrastructure from the ground up. It lost all the central direction which Moscow had previously provided. Ukraine has had to learn the "business of government" from scratch. It is like a child leaving home, not because he or she is ready to meet the world, but because the child wants the freedom to make its own decisions and the right to shape its own

future. And certainly, Ukraine is now enjoying a freedom that was previously denied to its citizens, but it has come with the cost of a deteriorated standard of living. And no one feels this more than the old people, like Konstantin, who just wish things could go back to the way they were before 1991. Certainly as a farmer, Konstantin is ashamed and frustrated that the once-productive Soviet collective farms now lay in abandoned ruins. And he cannot yet envision that individual farmers one day will be as productive as the old collectives were. It is a confusing world right now for the citizens of Ukraine.

HISTORY OF ANAKOI-ELI

*as remembered by Konstantin Ponomarenko;
story and letters translated by Inna Stryukova;
edited by Merv Weiss*

The lovely Burul'cha River begins in the mountains of southern Crimea. In winter it is small and does not have much water. But when spring comes and the snow begins to melt in the mountains, the river gets bigger and its water flows all over the valley. In this beautiful valley there were many small villages which had been part of Karasu-Bazar or Kai-Ma Khan's estate. The villages had names which were given to them by the Tatars. Burul'cha district consisted of twenty-five villages, including Anakoi-Eli, Tuku-Eli, Sarachel, Staraya Burul'cha, Novaya Burul'cha, and the village of Baraskhan in between them, Karlovka, Arganchuk and others. Along with other villages in the valley, there were also the villages where mainly the German population lived. They were Terekli-Shikel, Kerklech, Rosental, Neusatz, and others.

After Crimea had been joined to the Russian Empire in 1783, the tsarist government started populating the peninsula. Part of the Tatar population emigrated to Turkey. During this time, both Russian and Ukrainian families moved into these Crimean villages. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, foreigners were allowed to settle in Crimea, under very advantageous conditions. Thus, Germans, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, and others appeared in Crimea. Among the villagers in Anakoi-Eli, there were two Tatar families, the Estonian family, the Gypsy family, Russians and Germans. Everyone got along well. Those who were richer helped families with many children and also widows of soldiers who had been killed during World War I.

The land in our valley, thirty thousand hectares, was owned by landlord Rusov, who lived in Odessa. Later, all the land belonged to landlord Dick. The manager was a Schmidt. In 1924, according to the Decree on Land, the land was confiscated from landlord Dick and given to the peasants. He fled to France. The four-year Civil War, which began really in 1914, was over in Crimea in 1920. There were many foreign war prisoners in Crimea at that time.

Staraya Burul'cha was the capital village because it was the landlord's estate. His three two-storey houses were situated there, one for the landlord, and two for his workers. There were also other dwelling houses, grain-storage buildings, a stable, a

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blacksmith shop, a carpentry shop, a canteen and dining area, and barns for livestock. The stockyards were surrounded by high fences.

Anakoi-Eli was situated on the hills on the right bank of the Burul'cha River. There were about twenty-five houses there, the design of which was rather primitive. They were built of stone and *kalyb*, a mixture of clay and finely cut straw. They kneaded it with the help of horses or by feet. Then they put it into moulds and left it to dry. All the new settlers built this way. The houses in Anakoi-Eli were covered with the soil and ash on top. The floors were also covered with soil. In the middle of the house there was a stove. People used straw and sunflower stalks for fuel. In summer, those people who had livestock made small blocks of manure and dried them on the stone fences, barns and other farm buildings. I do not know why, but people did not cut wood [for fuel].

The citizens of Anakoi-Eli were mainly farmers. They had vegetable gardens which they watered, bringing the water from the creek. There was a meadow which provided them with grass and hay. They divided it between the farmers. There was also the "fund" land which was given to the people who lived near the forest. The farmers of the village grew grains, vegetables and orchard crops. The Germans grew much corn. The main food was the corn flour which they mixed with wheat and with it baked the so-called cornbread.

The holidays, weddings, birthdays, and baptisms were celebrated together. The Orthodox believers visited the Russian Church. The Tatars went to the Mosque. There were also Prayer Houses. The weddings were big events, because the villages were small at that time and all the villagers were invited. Before the Revolution of 1917, there were only church weddings. The nationality was not important. In Anakoi-Eli, there was a family where Yuri was Russian, and his wife, Philomena, was German.

The main holidays were New Years, Christmas, Easter and Baptisms. A very important holiday was Pokrov.¹ Everybody looked forward to this holiday. All the workers were hired until Pokrov, on the eve of which the masters had to pay the workers, who then left for their homes. Only the native villagers remained. The wages were very low, but the money seemed to be enough.

Before the Revolution, the farmers used horses and oxen to plough the land. The first tractor, as far as I remember, appeared in Anakoi-Eli about 1927. It was given to the village

for a short time, but then it was taken away. I do not remember why or where it went. The formation of the collective farms started in 1927. Many of the Germans had already left, some to Germany, others to Canada and America. The productivity of the collective farms was low in the first years of collectivization. Dating to the 1930s, the so-called machine and tractor stations were formed. They worked for the collectives and the state farms. Soon the collective and state farms began to own their own sowing and threshing machines and later the tractors. Before World War II, the collective in Staraya Burul'cha had three cars. The life of the farmers was getting better but the peaceful development was interrupted by the war with Finland first and then with Germany. World War II lasted for four long years and brought hardships and sufferings to all the nations in Europe.

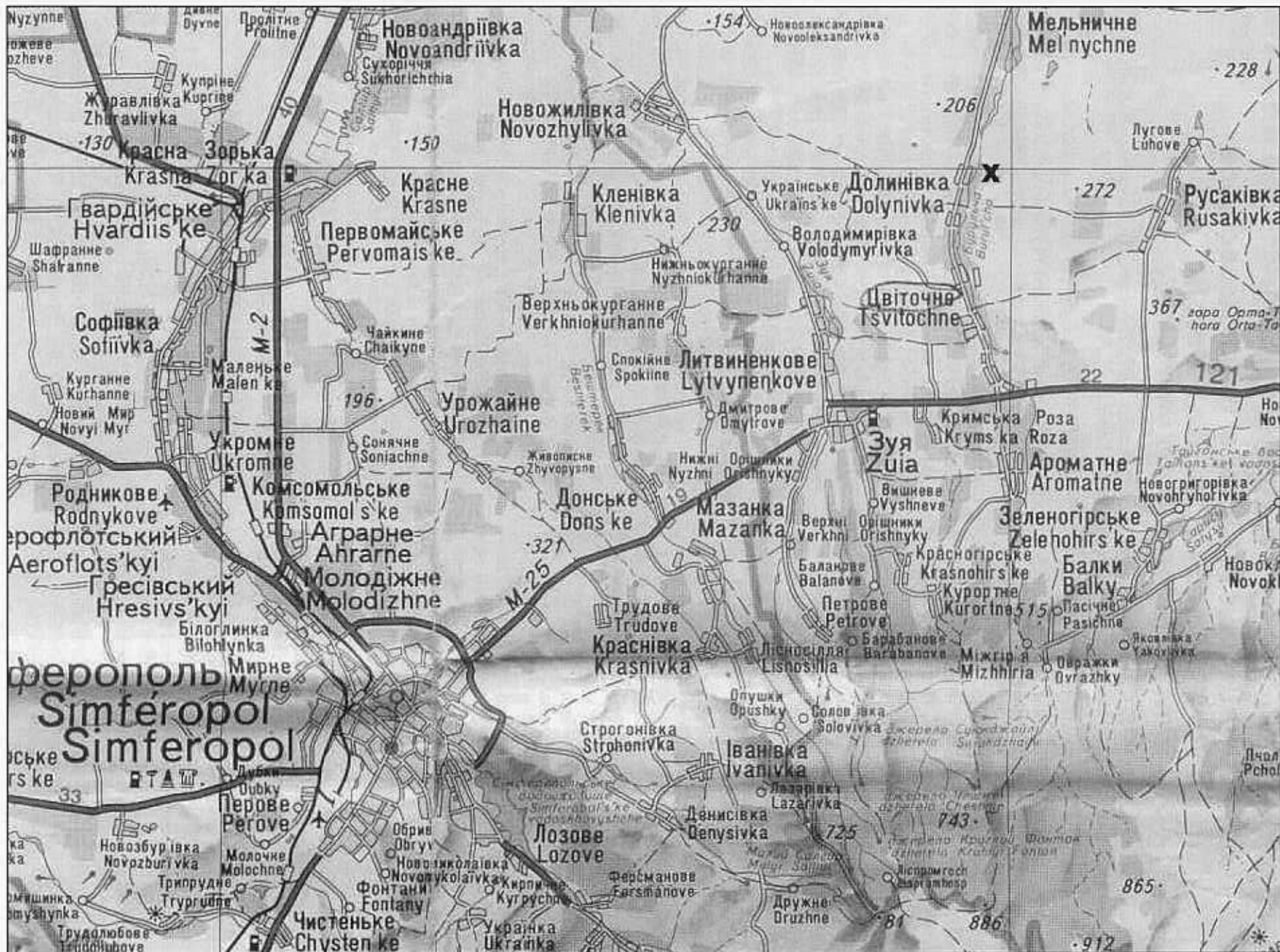
My parents came to Crimea on foot and lived there all their lives. They could not go back to Ukraine because their parents died early. They were fourteen years old when they came at the end of the nineteenth century. I would like to say that the German nation was, is and will be noted for being very hard-working, educated, and I would say, very cultured.

[Ulrich Mertens' list of Crimean villages gives the population of Anakoi-Eli as sixty-three people in 1904 and ninety-six in 1926. It was leveled to the ground in the late 1940s. On June 6, 2005, the author stood on the edge of a large barley field where the houses once stood, on a short, but steep rise overlooking the Burul'cha River.]

About the author

Merv Weiss is semi-retired from the building materials industry and lives with his wife of thirty-five years, Patti, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He became absorbed by genealogy six years ago and credits much of his progress in family research to membership in GRHS and to the many contacts he has developed in Canada, the USA, Ukraine, Germany and France. He has traveled twice to the Black Sea region of Ukraine and is returning in June 2006. He is currently working with the GRHS Archives Acquisition Committee to translate and index Crimean Lutheran Church records. He invites correspondence from anyone with information on these Crimean families—Schafer, Hörner, Tichy—from these areas: Rosental, Neusatz, Tasanai, Hochheim, and of course, Anakoi-Eli. Contact him through his website at www.russianroots.ca.

1. Pokrov is the feast of the Protection of the Holy Virgin. It marks the end of the harvest/fall and beginning of winter. At this point, the harvest is essentially over and the last fruits to ripen, the pumpkins, are picked on this day. In agrarian times, this holiday honored Mokosh, the goddess of the earth, who had provided her fruits so that people could survive. Pokrov means "protection" or "intercession."



To Find Anakoi-Eli

To find Anakoi-Eli, drive north-easterly from Simferopol on Highway M-25 about 25 kilometers. Shortly after the road turns due east, turn north to Tsvitochne, where Konstanin lives. A little further north, on the opposite side of this road, and on the east side of the Burul'cha River an "X" marks the former site of the village of Anakoi-Eli. At the intersection south of Tsvitochne, look further to the south and find "Aromatne"—this is the German Catholic village of Rosental, Crimea.