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Gammalsvenskby? What is that? Where is that?

An almost forgotten Swedish settlement in Eastern Europe

Outside mainland Estonia there are several islands that have had a Swedish-speaking population since at least the late 1200s. At that time, according to a fairly new theory, many Swedes from the island of Öland moved across the Baltic and settled on the big islands there. In the 1500s Sweden took over as the rulers of nowadays Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but lost the Baltic provinces to Russia after the Great Nordic War in the Peace Treaty of Nystad 1721.

The origin of Gammalsvenskby

The population of Gammalsvenskby traces its origins to *Dagö* (Hiiumaa) in present-day Estonia, once a part of the Duchy of Estonia.

The part of the peasant population who were in conflict with the local aristocracy petitioned the Russian Empress to accept them as their subjects. Empress Catherine the Great (II) of Russia accepted the petition under the condition that the peasants resettle in the newly conquered territories from the Ottoman Empire that were named New Russia (today in southern Ukraine.)

Enticed by promises of new fertile land, they trekked overland to southern Ukraine, as colonists for the new territories. While some sources call the Estonian Swedes' migration an outright expulsion from their Baltic homeland, other accounts stress the fact that these poor and oppressed serf farmers were given what may have seemed like a generous offer. They named their new settlement as Gammalsvenskby, which means "Old Swedish Village".

Regardless of the impetus, the outcome of this mass migration was, however, disastrous. Almost half of the nearly 1,000 villagers died on the march to their new home which they were required to get to on their own resources.

On arrival, there was no trace of the houses they had expected to find. Moreover, in their first year in Ukraine, an even larger portion of the settlers died. According to the records of the Swedish congregation, of the original thousand who had set out for Ukraine 18 months earlier,

only 135 people remained alive by March 1783.

Maintaining the Swedish heritage

From 1803 to 1805, German colonists founded three neighboring villages: *Schlangendorf*, *Mühlhausendorf* and *Klosterdorf*. As a consequence of the later arrival of the Germans and their own losses during the migration, the Swedes were soon outnumbered by the German newcomers. As a result, in later years many of the pastors and teachers serving the area were German. Combined with a growing shortage of arable land, this strained relations between Gammalsvenskby's Swedes and the nearby German population.

The people of Gammalsvenskby maintained their traditions, their Lutheran (Church of Sweden) faith, and their old Swedish dialect.

At the end of the 19th century, some ties with Sweden were re-established. Considerable funds were raised in Sweden and Finland to build a new Swedish church (a previous wooden church given by Prince Potemkin burned in the mid-19th century). The resulting parish church of St. John was consecrated in 1885. For a time before the revolutions following World War I, visits from Sweden became frequent, and some villagers subscribed to Swedish newspapers.

After World War I

World War I cut the communication channels with Sweden. After the Russian Civil War, the Government of Sweden, worrying about the fate of its compatriots, in 1921 petitioned to Moscow to allow residents of Schwedendorf to leave for their historical homeland. This movement was also supported by Archbishop Nathan Söderblom. The Kremlin decided to negotiate the terms. However, the Ukrainian Swedes who already adopted to the Kherson Region started to grumble against it, because in Ukraine they owned their houses, land, and farms. Emissaries were sent from Stockholm to Gammalsvenskby to con-

vince the compatriots to leave the unstable Ukraine. Negotiations with the Bolshevik regime and the Ukrainian Swedes stretched for almost eight years. In 1929, Moscow allowed for the Gammalsvenskby residents to leave, but under the condition that they only take what they could pack on a passenger train. On 1 August 1929, Swedes left the Kherson area and around 900 villagers arrived in Sweden. They were received by Prince Carl, Duke of Västergötland in a restaurant. Only a handful had opted to remain in Gammalsvenskby. Nearly a hundred soon moved on to Canada, a country to which earlier emigrants from Gammalsvenskby had gone. Most of these settled in Manitoba; some later returned to Sweden.

The majority of the villagers stayed in Sweden, many of them settling in Gotland. Despite their common origins, they were not allowed to stay in a single, common settlement. Considered immigrants in a country in the middle of a severe economic crisis, they were sometimes met with hostility. About 250 inhabitants stayed in their home village.

World War II and after

Those years were very difficult for the area, with Germans and Soviets fighting, and people were deported to Siberia and other places, and many disappeared.

Gammalsvenskby today

The village has been renamed and is now called *Verbivka* (Willow-village).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, contacts with Sweden and Canada were re-established, and the Church of Sweden and Gotland Municipality lent economic support. Today, the village has only around 108 people who share a Swedish cultural heritage. Only a few of them still speak the Old-Swedish dialect fluently.

King Carl Gustaf and Queen Silvia came for a visit in 2008.

Church records from Gammalsvenskby are found at *Arkiv Digital*.

*Elisabeth Thorsell
(with some help from Wikipedia.)*