

Ken's amazing Turkish adventure!

Ken Harshenin first experienced the land of his ancestors in 1990. That summer the Grand Forks USCC member was part of the eight-man Canadian Doukhobor volunteer work group¹ which traveled to Russia to help hundreds of Doukhobors from Soviet Georgia settle into their new locations in the Chern region south of Moscow.

He promptly fell in love – with the people, the land, the culture. This attraction has motivated four subsequent trips. In 1995, he participated in a “reunion” of some of the work group members with their hosts in Chern region. By 2003 he was retired from his teaching job and made an initial exploration of the Melitopol region in Southern Ukraine, site of the historic Doukhobor “Milky Waters” settlement of the early 1800s. In 2005, accompanied by his son Jason (former ISKRA Editor), Ken made an adventurous journey through Armenia into the Republic of Georgia to explore the Doukhobor settlements there, and such historic Doukhobor icons as the site of the 1895 Burning of Arms, Lushechka's residence, and the tombs of Doukhobor leaders. But the best was yet to come...

In recent years, Ken has carried out considerable genealogical research into his own Doukhobor origins.² That investigation revealed that both his maternal and paternal families had come to Canada directly from the Kars region, aboard the S.S. Lake Huron in May, 1899. At the time of the Doukhobor exodus, this area had been a part of the Russian Empire, but in subsequent years it had reverted back to Turkey. As far as was known, no Canadian Doukhobor had ever traveled back to this area of former Doukhobor settlement. Ken resolved to make that attempt in his very next trip.

That opportunity arose in the summer of 2007, when Ken revisited most of his previous destinations, and also made his first foray into the Kars region of Turkey. Those who've heard Ken's over-all account (with excellent photos) of his remarkable, two-month-

long excursion can testify that it was all extremely interesting. However, this article can only focus on the unprecedented portion of Ken's travels – the “discovery” of the Doukhobor villages near Kars.

After the first part of his journey in the Southern Ukraine, Ken flew to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Tatyana Tikhonova-Chuchmaeva had arranged a driver to pick him up there, and to drive him through the Kavkaz Mountains to her home in the Doukhobor village of Spasovka. Tatyana, who is well-known to many Canadian Doukhobors since her visit here in 1999, still serves as the head of the remaining Doukhobors in the Ninotsminda (formerly Bogdanovskiy) region of Georgia. She is presently very busy organizing the migration³ of several hundred of these Doukhobors to their new settlement in the Tambov Oblast (province) of central Russia, south-east of Moscow. In a December, 2007 telephone conversation with Tatyana, Ken learned that 21 houses were now completed in the Tambov settlement; an additional 131 houses still had to be built. It is hoped that this “third wave” migration will be completed in 2008.

Part of this group has already moved to Tambov Oblast, with some living in temporary quarters.⁴ When all of Tatyana's group is gone, there will only be about 20 families remaining in the Doukhobor settlements in Georgia. Ken raised the obvious question – who will look after the historic sites, such as the Sirotskoye museum, the leaders' tombs and the “Besedka” grotto at the Burning of Arms site? Tatyana assured him that “it will be looked after”. With further inquiries, he received a personal assurance from Zeena Ooglova (she also maintains regular contact with the Verigin family and other friends in Canada) that she, as one of the few who will not be moving to Tambov Oblast, will personally see to it that these important Doukhobor heritage sites will not fall into neglect. Their future status nevertheless remains an open question...

1. Ed. Note: See ISKRA No's 1714, 1716 and subsequent issues in 1990.

2. Ed. Note: See, for example, the heartrending, true-life, autobiographical account, “My Beautiful Sons...Why did you have to die?”, written by Ken's great grandfather, Akimooshka Faminov (with English translation by Vera Kanigan) published in ISKRA No's 1914 and 1916, October-November 2001.

3. This is the third recent group migration from Georgia to Russia; the first began in 1989, to the villages of Yuzhnoye and Archangelskoye in the Chern Region of the Tula Oblast; the second, about a decade later, was to the village of Mirnoye in the Bryansk Oblast; in addition, since the break-up of the USSR in 1991, hundreds of individual Doukhobors from Georgia have also migrated to various parts of Russia.

4. See article by Jonathan J. Kalmakoff in ISKRA No 1998 (pp 37-38 – September 3, 2007).



During the first part of his trip, Ken revisited the “Milky Waters” area in southern Ukraine. In the Doukhobor village of Terpeniye he poses with the centuries-old Oak tree, one of three said to have been planted 200 years ago by Doukhobor leader, Saveliy Kapustin. Once part of the Sirotskoye compound, it’s now in a playschool yard.



In the Milky Waters village of Troitskoye stands this early 20th century building, one of many built at that time by a Doukhobor builder named Fominoff, likely a relative of Ken’s, since his mother’s Fominoff ancestors lived here, and some remained behind after the others were exiled to Transcaucasia in the 1840s.



At the Terpeniye marketplace – ripe, locally-grown cherries for sale in the first week of June! This area was always known for its rich soils and warm climate – no wonder that the Doukhobors were able to set up such a prosperous commune in a very short while when, in 1801, they were granted settlement here by Tsar Alexander the First, a historic Doukhobor benefactor.



Near the area where Kapustin’s Sirotskiy Dom once stood, there is now a park. Featuring a museum and this “Sacred Spring” and pool (considered to have special healing powers), the park attracts large numbers of tourists.



Stepan Petrovich Demytyev (r), whose mother was a Doukhobor, moved from Dmanisi, Georgia to the Ukraine at the age of 14. He served as a very helpful guide and driver for Ken’s tour of the Milky Waters settlements. Alexander Anatolyevich Chukhrayenko (l), local historian, has published a book on the history of Terpeniye; founded by Doukhobors in 1805, it now has some 5000 residents. He was also very informative, and sold Ken one of his last two remaining copies of his book.



According to A. Chukhrayenko, this mound was the site of a day-long conference with Doukhobor elders conducted by Tsar Alexander the First, during his second visit to their settlement, in 1825. His first visit was in 1818. During his visits the liberal-minded Tsar also met with the Mennonite and Molokan settlements in the area.

During his visits with the Georgian Doukhobors and others he met along the way, Ken was constantly inquiring about the best possible way to get to the Kars area of Turkey. It became clear that this was not to be a simple matter. For one thing, along the shortest, most direct route (see map next page) through Gyumri (formerly “Leninakan” – Soviet era, and “Alexandropol” – Tsarist times), the border between Armenia and Turkey was closed. He would have to cross the Georgian-Turkish border on the much longer, more circuitous route through Vale and Posof.

He prepared a back-pack, left his suitcase in Spasovka, and hired a cab to take him to the Turkish border.

Another issue was transportation. Ken learned that hiring a car to travel all the way to Kars would be much too expensive. One of his local acquaintances, Pyotor Vasilyevich Zoobkov (featured in the VHS documentary, “Потерянный край”) offered to help. His efforts confirmed that hiring a car would be too costly, and he advised Ken to get to the border, and then try to find a ride from the Turkish side. Not a very reassuring scenario, but Ken was determined to find his ancestral Doukhor villages. He prepared a back-pack, left his suitcase in Spasovka, and hired a cab to take him to the Turkish border. The taxi driver left him there, in the middle of the rolling alpine meadows, in this forlorn area of the Transcaucasian plateau...

Good luck always seems to travel with those who are a little more daring. At the border crossing Ken met a Turkish driver who was tending to his transport truck, in which he was hauling a load from Baku, Azerbaijan to Istanbul, Turkey. He spoke a little Russian, and was willing to help. At about this time, a large passenger bus⁵ came up to the border from the Georgian side. The truck driver spoke to the two Turkish bus drivers, and then explained to Ken that they had agreed to let him board the bus, but only on the Turkish side. If he wanted to travel with them, they would wait for him on the other side.

Ken quickly went into the border crossing. He was asked to show his passport twice on the Georgian side, but went through with no problem. The officials on the Turkish side, however, spoke only very broken English,

and also asked for his passport on two occasions. They questioned him quite intensively as to his reasons for coming to Turkey. When he explained as best he could, that he wished to visit his ancestral villages near Kars, the official’s mouth fell open. He looked Ken up and down – clearly he didn’t look very Turkish! When Ken further explained that there had been Russians living there a century ago, they grudgingly accepted his story, and issued him a visa, at a cost of \$60.00 (US).

The bus was still waiting as promised. Ken got on, and when the driver said something in Turkish, he showed him his wallet. The driver took out a \$20.00 bill (US) and they were on their way!

The bus route went through a summit at an elevation of 8000 feet, and in places there was still snow along the road, even though it was the middle of June. Ken was surprised to see a number of inhabited villages along the way, with low-slung houses of rock and sod seemingly embedded in the barren alpine terrain. The bus passed through the town of Ardahan, and within a few hours was already dropping him off on the outskirts of Kars. Using sign language, the driver explained that the bus did not go into the city. There were some young people waiting for a city bus to pick them up and the driver asked them to help guide Ken to his destination in Kars, a sizeable city of some 76,000 inhabitants.

Earlier, Ken had searched the Internet for accommodation in Kars, and had chosen a hotel, but hadn’t made a reservation, as he had no way of knowing exactly when he’d get there. Now, the friendly young Turks escorted him off the city transit bus and walked him the 6-7 blocks to the hotel he had named. The young folks also spoke a very small bit of broken English, as did the hotel clerk, so Ken was able to get himself a nice room for only \$25.00 US, including breakfast!

Prior to leaving Canada, Ken had done some research about the six Doukhor villages in the Kars area. Very little was known about their exact locations but he was able to get a pretty close idea from various published references, and especially from the descriptions contained in the book, “Autobiography of a Siberian Exile”.⁶ Now that he was in the city of Kars, he needed to find a guide who could take him out to the general area, northeast of the city, where he believed the villages were to be found. After some more “broken

5. It turned out, after all, that there was a regularly scheduled bus service that ran directly from Tbilisi into Turkey, passing by on the outskirts of Kars – useful information for the next trip!

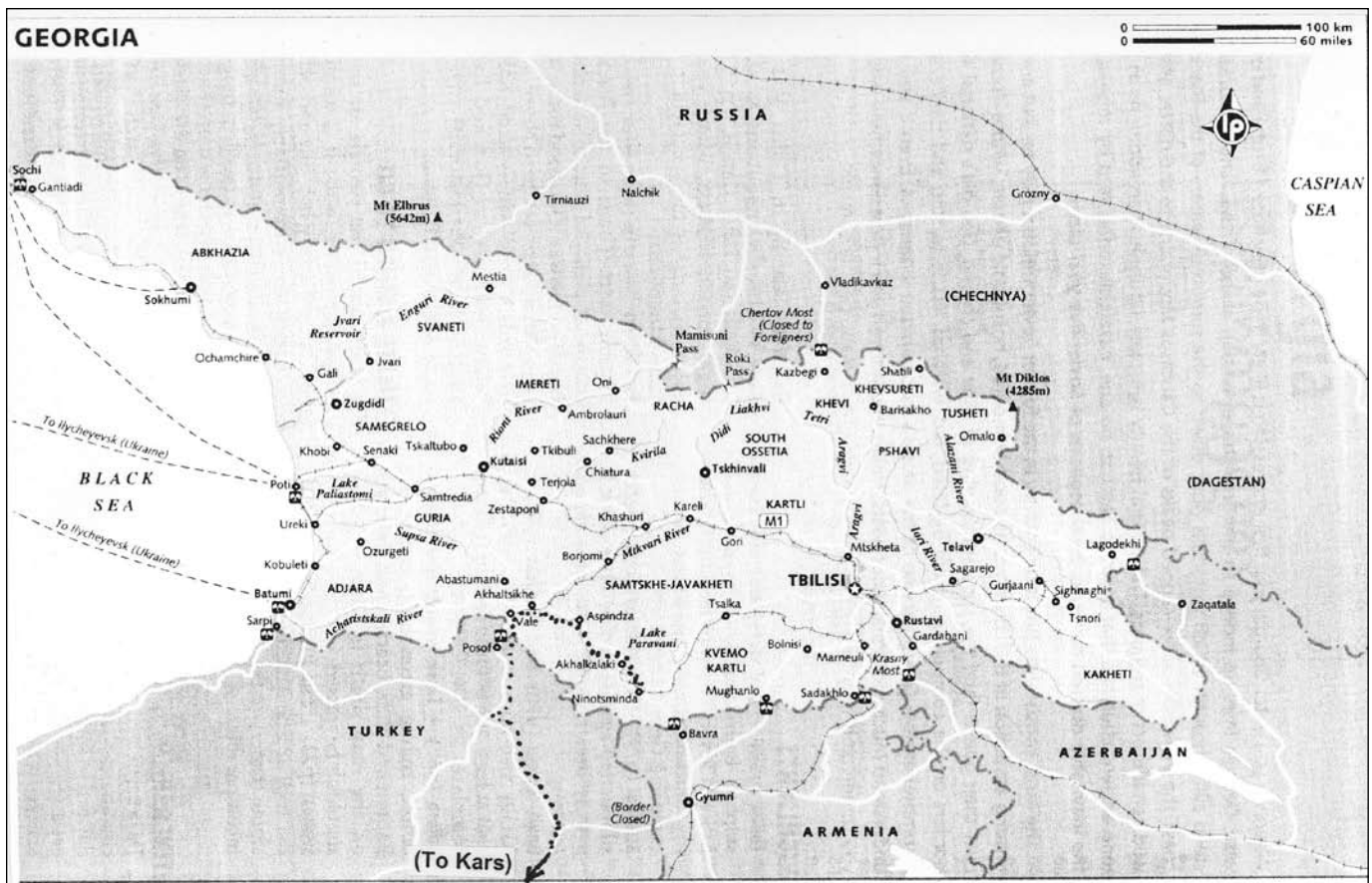
6. Ed. Note: This recently published book is based on the autobiographical journal of Alexey Ivanovich Popov (1877-1955). It was transcribed, translated and published (2006) in a very limited edition by Alexey’s son, well-known Doukhor writer and historian (and ISKRA Editorial Board member), Eli A. Popoff. A few remaining copies are available from the BIRCHES Publishing, Box 1750, Grand Forks, B.C. V0H 1H0. Tel. (250) 442-1213, email: birchespublishing@shaw.ca, Price: \$30.00 per copy, free delivery in Grand Forks; elsewhere add \$7.00 for mailing.

language” communication with hotel staff, Ken’s luck again came through, when he was referred to a driver/guide who had grown up in the very area that Ken wanted to explore. The guide spoke reasonable English, and explained that his father and grandfather had talked about Russians living in nearby villages at one time in the past. Amazed at his good fortune, Ken hired him for \$90.00 a day and they were off in search of the villages.

Alexey Popov’s account indicated that the Doukhobor villages were situated along the route from Kars to Alexandropol (now Gyumri). There was only one main road heading out from Kars in a north-easterly direction toward Gyumri, so Ken deduced that the villages were somewhere along that highway. This was corroborated by his guide, who confirmed that the villages that had been inhabited by Russians were in this direction. In this manner, keeping careful track of distance, they arrived at the settlement that Ken had calculated should be the former Doukhobor village of Terpeniye and, sure enough, the locals confirmed that Russians had at one time lived here!

The settlement had a population of only a few hundred, but some of the original sod-roofed stone huts that would have been there in Doukhobor times (pre-1920) were still occupied, and some now even had electricity! This was an exciting moment for Ken, as his mother’s Fominoff ancestors had lived in this village. After a few hours of exploring the village, and conversing with some of the residents (his guide acting as translator), they traveled on.

From the relative juxtaposition of the villages, as described in Alexey Popov’s account, Ken and his guide were able to locate the present settlements that were formerly the Doukhobor villages of Spasovka and Kirilovka. There were no other settlements in the immediate vicinity, so this helped in the process of elimination, in determining the location of the villages, and so, they drove on from Terpeniye and came to Spasovka. Ken had learned from the various accounts that the Burning of Arms site in the Kars region was near the village of Spasovka, at the base of a hill. There is only one hill anywhere near the settlement, so Ken was able to locate an area near the foot of it that very



The map above shows Georgia and the surrounding countries, with a scale of distance (top, right). Unfortunately a map that also shows Kars and other Turkish details was not available, so the road to Kars is indicated at bottom – the actual distance south of the arrow is only about 20km. The dotted line indicates the route taken by Ken from the Doukhobor villages (see “Ninotsminda” – formerly “Bogdanovka”).



Ken poses with Leelya, a friend who guided him around the exotic Georgian capital of Tbilisi. While in the city he stayed with Leelya's friend Zeena.



In the home (Georgian Doukhobor village of Spasovka) of Tatyana Tikhonova-Chuchmaeva (at right), her husband Volodya (at left), their daughter, Valentina, and the driver, Merman, who drove Ken from Tbilisi.



In the home (Georgian Doukhobor village of Bogdanovka – Ninotsminda) of Zeena Ooglova (second from right) and her family.



The two friendly Turkish bus drivers.



Downtown Kars.



In the general area of the Doukhobor villages East of Kars, are located the amazing ruins of Ani, the medieval capital of Armenia, with many centuries-old buildings, such as this one, still standing.



The old road to Armenia (from Kirilovka) – it is very likely that the Doukhobors used this very route when originally migrating to the Kars area in the 1870s, and whenever they traveled to the city of Alexandropol (now Gyumri).



Ken, with local guide on “main street” of Kirilovka.



Old sod-roofed stone houses in Kirilovka – they may well have been built by Doukhobors more than a century ago.



The likely location of the Burning of Arms (Kars district) near the village of Spasovka.



A sod-roofed stone house in the Kars district village of Terpeniye that is still in use.



Ken’s Turkish guide speaks to a local official (in suit) in Terpeniye.

closely resembled the descriptions he had read about. Although there was no way to verify his conclusion, he is confident that it is very likely the correct one.

Time was now running out, so they turned around and drove back through Terpeniye to Kirilovka, where Ken's Harshenin ancestors had lived in the late 1800s. Ken was fascinated to find the old cemetery site, where among others in the many unmarked graves, his great-grandfather Harshenin would have been buried. He also learned that there was now a Turkish military base a mere kilometer or so from the village.

Ken's thirst for discovering has not been fully quenched. . .

All three of the villages are presently inhabited, but with only about a few hundred residents each.⁷ There was not enough time and resources on this trip to search for the remaining three Doukhobor villages, but Ken was deeply gratified that he'd found "a missing link" in his life and gained a better idea of the Kars era in the life of his ancestral families. He now had a visual picture of the landscape and scenery of the area, and he could understand why some of the Kars Doukhobors had come to Canada from a somewhat more prosperous base. The climate and terrain in the Kars settlements was much friendlier than in the Georgian settlements, and was capable of growing a wider variety of food crops, including vegetables and fruits, something he was now able to witness for himself. Kars is known as the "Honey Capital" of Turkey, and Ken saw several large honey farms with hundreds of hives, while traveling in search of the villages.

It had truly been another "experience of a lifetime", and the remainder of his journey was also very memorable. Nevertheless, Ken's thirst for discovering has not been fully quenched, and he is already planning another future trip, back to the historic Doukhobor sites in Georgia and Turkey.

I jokingly asked if I could tag along, and he surprised me by replying that, yes, he was willing to look at the possibility of leading a group of 6-8 people in a future excursion.

I can only save my pennies and hope it all works out!

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P.S. In December 2007 Ken Harshenin made a brief presentation about his trip at the USCC Community Centre in Grand Forks. Since then he's had requests to have an account published in ISKRA, and when he asked me to help put together an article, I was happy to comply, as this is a topic of great interest for me. For most of the 20th century, after their emigration from their historic homeland, Canadian Doukhobors had very little contact with the former locales of their ancestors. Recent decades, however, have been very different. Many Canadian Doukhobors have traveled to the areas of the former USSR where Doukhobors lived at one time or another, and quite a few have visited the special historic Doukhobor sites in Georgia, Ukraine and Russia. Modern-day Doukhobor "explorers" such as Ken, and Mahrusya Sherstobitoff (who was the first Canadian Doukhobor to visit the areas in Siberia where Doukhobors were exiled in the 1890's – see ISKRA No 1950, November 26th, 2003) have gone even further afield. There is still more exploring to be done, however, in such areas as Amur, Cyprus, and even Tambov Oblast – one of the major areas of Doukhobor origin. Now, as mentioned above, some of the Georgian Doukhobors are moving back there, but it doesn't seem like any Canadian Doukhobors have ever visited this area. Russian researchers who have done so, report that there are existing archival records and even museum artifacts from the Doukhobor presence there yet in the 1700s. So, there are still some exciting Doukhobor explorations ahead, a process which gives all of us a better understanding of our amazing Doukhobor heritage.

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These iron nails, hand-forged by Doukhobor builders, were salvaged from the dismantling of some original Doukhobor buildings in the Milky Waters area, and given to Ken Harshenin as a memento of his 2007 visit there.

7. The excursion from Kars in search of the Doukhobor villages was a hectic and tiring long-day affair. Ken had hoped to return a second day but that proved to be impossible at the time. He regrets that in all the excitement he neglected to record the exact names and spellings of the present Turkish settlements at the site of the former Doukhobor villages, an oversight to be corrected on the next trip! (An interesting side-note: The Doukhobors had always referred to their group from the Kars area settlements as the "Karakhanskiye". Interestingly the Google maps of the area in which Ken found the villages shows a settlement named "Karahan".)



In his extensive 2007 journey, Ken also visited with friends in Kiev, Chelyabinsk and Moscow, as well as in the Doukhobor settlements in the Chern region, south of Moscow. Here he poses with old friend Anna Astofoorova in Archangelskoye village, Chern Region. Anna and her husband Vasily visited with Doukhobors in Canada several years ago.



Ethnographer and specialist in Doukhobor history, Svetlana Inikova, in her office in Moscow.



Fred Plotnikoff (formerly from the West Kootenays) and his wife, Polina (formerly Kalmikova), in their home in the Doukhobor village of Archangelskoye.



Dan Koochin (at right) and friends in Moscow, where he teaches English. Formerly of Grand Forks, BC, Dan is one of many dozens of Canadian Doukhobors who now live and work in Russia. Dan's late father, Bill Koochin, was one of Ken's volunteer colleagues in the work group of 1990.



At a Mexican restaurant in Moscow – a birthday party put on by Jason Konken (at right) for his wife Sveta (second from right). Formerly of Grand Forks, BC, Jason has been living and working in Russia and the Ukraine for many years.



Jason says a few words for the occasion. Jason's father, Jack Konken of Grand Forks, BC, was also one of Ken's colleagues in the work group of 1990.

