

Plain Believers in Ukraine¹

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Abstract: In the early 2000s, a Ukrainian television broadcast identified a Christian group about 175 kilometers southwest of Lviv in western Ukraine as “Ukrainian Amish,” due to their plain dress, simple lifestyle, and rejection of motorized vehicles. North American Amish and Plain Mennonites working in Ukraine with Christian Aid Ministries and Master’s International Ministries then made contact with the group, curious about its origins and beliefs. In this article, Edward A. Kline reports on his time among the Plain believers in the Ukrainian village of Kosmirin. Kline describes both the similarities and differences in belief and practice between these Ukrainian Plain believers and traditional Amish and Plain Mennonites.

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In the summer of 2008, Wayne Hursh of Christian Aid Ministries in Ukraine² and Victor Bernyk first visited a group of believers in southwest Ukraine who live and believe in many ways that seem strikingly like the Amish. A program on Ukrainian TV had earlier called them “Ukrainian Amish.” Friends had told Hursh about the broadcast and when he visited the area, he decided to look up the group. He discovered that they lived very simply and sought to be separate from the world. They seemed hesitant to reveal much about themselves, only that they came from an Orthodox background and have been evangelical believers for several generations.

Sometime later, Bruce Jantzi from Master’s International Ministries in Chernivtsi (Чернівці) was part of a small group that visited these people. The group also found them to be reserved, and when they asked to pray together, Jantzi discovered that the Ukrainians were offended by the visitors’ cameras and didn’t want to be photographed.

In October 2008, Roy Hershberger Jr., an Amish bishop from Berlin, Ohio, visited this same village. When the so-called Ukrainian Amish heard that the Amish position on cars, electricity, cameras, and phones is similar to their own, they were more receptive to conversation with Hershberger. They said that if any more Amish come, they want to know in advance so they can get more people together and meet at a different place.

¹ Much of this essay appeared in a two-part article in the January and February 2010 issues of *The Diary* under the title “The Ukrainian Amish.” It appears here with some revised and updated content.

² Ukraine is spelled Україна in the Ukrainian language. This article includes both English versions and Ukrainian versions of the spelling of specific place names.



In July 2009, my wife, Adah, and I, along with Beth Hostetler, traveled to Chernivtsi, Ukraine, after helping at a summer Bible camp in the Kyiv area for Master's International Ministries. Chernivtsi, where Bruce Jantzi and his family live, is about 120 miles from the community of Plain believers. Jantzi sent word that we would like to visit them and set a date and time.

On Sunday afternoon, July 26, we headed west and slightly north. We traveled through a beautiful but largely deserted plateau between the Prut (Прут) and Dniester (Dnipro or Дніпрó) Rivers, which run parallel to each other in far western Ukraine. The area looked like excellent farming country. After a three-hour drive on a bumpy road (although designated as a major highway), we came to where the first several visits took place. Here we picked up two men belonging to the group, of whom one could speak Russian with Jantzi. (Their native tongue is Ukrainian.) They told us that our destination was just across the Dniester (Дніпрó) River, but there was no bridge here. So we drove along the river for 40 km to a bridge, went across, and came back on the other side. The village of Kosmirin is about 175 kilometers southwest of Lviv in western Ukraine. See Figure 1.

When we got to Kosmirin (Космирин), we saw some of the Plain believers in the village. One could easily pick them out by their dress. Their homes were also distinctive—all were painted light blue. We were taken to a compound on the edge of the village where twenty to thirty families live. It appears that eight to ten families live in a long apartment-like house. Each family has two or three rooms. The central kitchen was in another building. There were several barns on the site, and the buildings were surrounded with gardens, orchards, and grain fields.

Figure 1*Topographic Map of Ukraine*

Note. Adapted from *Wikimedia.org*. Wikimedia Commons.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/ac/Topographic_map_of_Ukraine_%28with_borders_and_towns%29.svg/2560px-Topographic_map_of_Ukraine_%28with_borders_and_towns%29.svg.png

We looked around and visited with our guide, but he did not answer all our questions, saying that the elders and leaders were coming and that they would answer them. Soon people started coming, and among them was an older man, one of the ministers, who invited us into the quarters of their recently deceased leader, Evan Derkash. His elderly widow still lived there.

We were seated along the outside wall and the room quickly filled. Some men and women sat on benches in front of us. Others stood behind them, and at the back wall, men stood on benches and stools with their heads to the ceiling. As the space filled up, people sat in front of us on the floor. The doorways and open windows were packed with people. There were probably one hundred adults there.

We talked for four hours. As time passed, the interpreter's young son became restless, so two of the young women who came with us took him outside. There were about fifty youth and children outside. The youth immediately surrounded them and asked the woman who spoke Ukrainian about their lives and about America. The language this group speaks is apparently an old Ukrainian dialect. Our interpreter, Michael Jantzi, did not always understand all the words. Victor Bernyk, who is native Ukrainian, said they speak like his grandmother used to, in an old religious dialect.

Some of the older ones spoke Russian, learned during the Communist era, but the younger ones did not.

The older man welcomed us and told us they want to know more about the Amish since they were being compared with them and don't know what we believe. I spoke briefly about our past in Europe and in colonial America, and about the persecutions that took place. When I mentioned *Martyr's Mirror*, the older man spoke up and said he'd like to read it. I also explained our beliefs and values and how we live. I told them how we differ from general religious society. It was heartwarming to see them nod their heads in agreement as I explained our doctrines. They all expressed surprise at the number of Amish in America. Later they told us their leader, Evan Derkash, had a vision that there are other groups who still hold to the truth, and that they should seek them. They believe nominal Christianity to be backslidden and apostasized. We came as close to their expectation of Christians as anyone they had met. He also believed that the time would come when people would ask about their faith and respect them, and now this was taking place.

I asked them to tell us about their background and beliefs. This is the story they told:

A man from that village had been sent to the Ural Mountains in 1914, during WWI. He probably was in a prison labor camp. There he became converted through the influence of another prisoner. We surmise this prisoner may have been a Mennonite, because when the convert came back to the village in 1928, he believed in nonresistance, separation from the world, and brotherhood. The elder said that their "faith begin in 1928 when this brother began to preach and people became converted." The village at that time was steeped in Orthodox practice. A church of born-again believers resulted from the preaching.

Life was hard in those times, since the Communists had taken over in 1917 and tried to take control. But the area was staunchly nationalistic and resisted the Russian communists, who did not gain control until the 1940s. During this time, they had to meet secretly to worship and baptize. Their leaders were harassed by the KGB but were spared from arrest. They had very few Bibles during this time.

Then, in the 1940s, a Ukrainian evangelist name Onyschenko bought them Bibles. Onyschenko was a convert of the Stundist movement³ that was active during this time in Zaporosche.

In 1943, a man by the name of Evan Derkash was converted. He had been raised a staunch Orthodox but joined the group and married a "Stundist" girl. (The elderly woman was still living in the house when we visited.) His Stundist father-in-law gave him a Bible and started him on his spiritual journey. They explained that for "six years and forty days" Evan struggled with his sinful nature, until he found

³ The Stundists were German Pietists who promoted one hour (*eine Stunde*) of Bible study and prayer each day. This movement laid the groundwork for the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia in 1860 and for some Baptists.

victory and was then baptized. Evan eventually became the leader of the group, until his death in January 2009.

They spoke very highly of Derkash, referring to him as their “prophet” or “teacher.” They spoke at length of his visions and dreams. By this time a younger man, who was also a minister and a brother-in-law to the older man, arrived in the room. Both were related to Derkash, who had appointed them as ministers. This younger man eventually did most of the talking. They said Derkash had heard a voice from a fire that said he would be ordained—the elder used the exact words he had heard from the fire, even though he had told no one about them.

They also said that Derkash changed his emphasis as time went on. Others began having visions and dreams and taught things that were not scriptural. So Derkash began to teach that the Bible is sufficient and is the ultimate guide for a godly life. They still put more emphasis on visions and dreams than most Anabaptists would, but seem to have found a balance. Before he died, Derkash requested that his teachings, especially his visions, not be written down, so that the church would not depend on him instead of the Bible.

I explained how the Amish use the lot to ordain ministers and they found that very interesting, never having heard of that being done though they recognized it as scriptural from Acts 2. I asked how they ordain leaders and they said Derkash had appointed them, with the consent of the church.

They emphasized that the people of God should be separate from the world. The world is corrupt and will perish, so Christians should be free from bondage to or dependence on the world. They said this is why they decided against electricity, phones, and gas when these things came to the village in the 1970s. Derkash did not want automobiles or any of the aforementioned things, and they still keep to this rule. They do not use any power tools at home and do only what they can do with horses or by hand. They do not raise much grain because they cannot thresh it. Sometimes they hire tractors or combines to do field work, but mostly they make hay by hand. They cut it with scythes and rake it by hand. They raise hogs and cattle and butcher them themselves. They have seamstresses who make most of their clothes, several cobblers who make shoes, and someone who makes all the men’s hats. When I asked if they have blacksmiths, they said, “Every one of us can shoe a horse!” Their houses are plain, without anything hung on the walls. It seemed that floors are dirt covered with carpets.

The Plain believers have a dress standard, which they said was shown to Derkash in a vision after problems arose with members’ dress. Men and women wear only long sleeves. Women wear skirts and blouses that they make themselves. They are plain and modest, but of all colors. Women also wear heavy scarves at all times. Married women tie them in the back and unmarried women tie them in the front. All men wear cloth hats, which they make themselves. Otherwise, the men seem to wear any clothes so long as they are not extravagant. They stressed that clothes can become an idol and a snare if we set our hearts on them. They live and dress as simple village people.

When we asked about their beliefs, they said they believe we must all be born again and that salvation comes by faith in God’s grace and forgiveness through repentance. They said we must overcome our own carnal nature and said when we can love and forgive those who offend us, that

is evidence that we have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. To the Amish, this description may sound like a teaching of the second work of grace, but they didn't talk about a distinct experience, only about the signs of that baptism. It seemed similar to the idea of "growing in the Spirit."

They practice believers baptism by immersion in the Dneister River. They said it is a very sacred occasion, and they do it at sundown or daybreak, with only the ministers, the applicant's family, and a few "witnesses" present. When I asked why they do it in this manner, they admitted that it is probably a carryover from Communist times when they had to perform baptisms in a secretive way.

When asked how they instruct candidates for baptism, they spoke at length about how they go through the Ten Commandments. They teach strongly against sins of the Spirit: idolatry, jealousy, hatred, covetousness, backbiting, immoral thoughts, and so forth. They question their candidates not only about their faith, but also about these sins. If baptismal candidates do not have clear victory over them, they delay baptism until they have a clearer testimony.

They said if any member says something about another person that is not true or a rumor, the offenders must go before the church and confess what was said and what is the truth and ask forgiveness. And if the slander spread to another village, they have to go there and do the same.

They do not take part in the military and will not take an oath of office or be inducted into the army. Although their children attend public school, they lamented that much evil comes to their children through this. They often are a majority in the classroom, which is the only reason they can tolerate the public school system. But they send their children only through elementary school. Consequently, most of their young men fail the written induction test when called to the military. A few have served time in prison for not serving in the army.

When I asked what they work for an income, they explained that they do construction work (mostly masonry). They said when they go away from the village for work, they send youth, skilled laborers, and old men together, and they do not stay more than a few days. When they are paid, the money is divided equally among the workers. Asked how they obtain jobs, they said they hire drivers from the village. When working on job sites away from home, they use cell phones and also power tools and generators. They also use telephones at some of their nonmember neighbors in the village. My wife, Adah, asked the women how they get groceries, and they said they hire drivers to go to the city for basic groceries and dry goods.

I asked if they use doctors and hospitals, and they said they do if they must. But when someone is sick, they pray over the person, and pray for wisdom and direction about how to treat him or her. They said most of their sick are healed this way after God shows them what to do. However, they have, for example, used hospitals for caesarian-section births. Hospitalizations are a real problem, though, because they are expensive and group members have little cash. They have also come into conflict with doctors who insist that they should limit the size of their families.

They have large families, averaging ten to twelve children, and they seem to attach significance to childbearing as a part of salvation (1 Tim. 2:15). The children looked healthy and clean and were happy and relaxed. They do not allow their youth to walk the village streets alone after dark.

They also said they lose only 2 or 3 percent of their young people to the world. One man offered that it takes “much admonishing and prayer, with many tears, to bring up children.” They have high moral standards for their young people.

I asked if they practice excommunication. They said they do, but very reluctantly. They work diligently, sometimes for years, to win back those who go astray. They said many will return after much admonition.

When we asked about their worship services, they said they worship in designated homes. Several ministers preach and then it is open for others to speak also. They do not always meet on Sundays. They believe the New Testament principle of a day of rest is fulfilled when one ceases from serving sin (based on Hebrews 4). Thus, they keep a day of rest, but it can be any day of the week. They refrain from work on Sunday as much as possible in order not to offend their Orthodox neighbors. However, if a harvest is ready, they will do what they think is necessary.

One area of conversation that made us a bit uncomfortable was that of eschatology. The younger minister spoke for almost an hour about their idea of the end times. They have detailed ideas concerning the superpowers, Israel, and Armageddon. I explained that Amish do not think it is important to figure that all out. We are called to be ready and to be salt and light to the world. When the salt becomes too little, then the end will come. They agreed with that statement. Perhaps they never heard any alternative philosophy of end times.

After four hours of conversation, we asked them to sing a song. They sang slowly and plaintively for fifteen minutes—one song. According to Victor Bernyk, the words were very meaningful, but it was not a hymn with which he was familiar. Bruce Jantzi suggested that Adah and I sing a verse of the *Lob Lied* in the traditional slow tune. We sang three lines, and they seemed to like that very much.

We suggested praying together, and they responded that they were waiting for us to suggest it, not knowing whether we would accept them. They all knelt, and each prayed his own prayer audibly. It was not loud or disorderly, but very fervent. Some cried. After perhaps seven to eight minutes, the group quieted, and the older minister prayed for another five minutes and then closed.

They then asked us if we had any criticisms or comments about what they had shared. I made a few comments about the role of visions and dreams and about speculation on eschatology, but emphasized support for their faith and life. They wanted to know if the Amish would accept them and consider their faith as scriptural. They asked several times if we would judge them for their peculiar beliefs. I assured them I understand how they think and believe and respect them for it. They had been mocked and upbraided for their convictions by other villagers. They said they told us more about themselves and their faith than they had every told anyone before this. They asked us to tell them if we see something they should correct or change.

At this point, I looked at the clock and it only showed eight o'clock. When I asked about the time they said they still use “Polish time.” Poland had ruled this area up to WWII and they still follow its time zone. In addition, they do not observe daylight savings time. Thus, they are two hours behind the rest of the village. It was 10:00 p.m.! After serving us borsch, sour milk, and cabbage rolls, we headed for home.

Altogether, it seemed to us that the so-called Ukrainian Amish likely had some Mennonite influence early in their history, but their applications of Anabaptist principles were made largely on their own. During their early years, they were largely isolated from other evangelical groups, with no one to observe or turn to for counsel. It is intriguing that they have developed many convictions that bear similarity to convictions found among various Amish groups, such as a dress standard, their nurture of children, rejection of technology, a close brotherhood, and resistance to change as seen in their holding to their own older languages.

Their religious practices reflect their adaptations as they developed their particular form of plain, communal living in the context of first living under the Soviet Union and then in the independent country of Ukraine. There are now five villages of these Plain believers, and their ministers meet to help keep beliefs and practices standardized across all five localities. Important practices include baptism, marriages, ordinations, worship services, and funerals.

Baptism: Their baptisms reflect a reluctance to change from their practice of meeting secretly in Communist times. Only the minister and a few of the applicants' families as witnesses gather on a Sunday evening toward sundown at a secluded place along the Dniester River. Thus, it is an exclusive and sacred occasion, with baptism by immersion. They often have three baptism events each year, with up to fifty youth ages fifteen through eighteen being baptized. The youth are examined by the ministers, who sometimes find some youth who are not quite ready. These are advised to make amends in the next several months.

Marriages: The Plain believers do not allow their youth to show special attention to each other. Nor do they allow their youth to be alone outside after dark. When a young man desires to marry a young woman, he first obtains the approval of his parents and ministers. Then the ministers speak with the young woman and her parents. She is then given time to say yes or no. Marriage takes place at a regular worship service. The bride does not wear a special dress, although usually she wears a new dress. They do have some special food afterward, such as cake or fruit.

Ordinations: When their teacher, Evan Derkash, was living, he would simply appoint a minister with the approval of the other ministers. Since his death, as they see a need for another minister, they appoint a time of fasting and prayer. Someone makes a nomination and this person is interviewed by the ministers. If they feel he is qualified, the nominee and his wife will visit each family in their congregation, asking for forgiveness for faults and for support. After a period of proving, he is ordained. It is not clear what they do if more than one person is nominated. They have around forty ministers in five villages, and a lead pastor in each village.

Sunday worship: Because of their increasing numbers, they have built new, large meetinghouses in each village with the support of North American Anabaptists.⁴ Each has a seating capacity of 250 to 400 people, but there often is not enough room for everyone. On Sunday morning, the mothers gather at 9:00 a.m. for a prayer service. Every third Sunday, two men from the church lead this prayer service. Around one o'clock, the children gather for a children's service,

⁴ Financial assistance to the Ukrainian Plain believers is generally through Iron Curtain Ministries, a largely New Order Amish relief organization but one to which many Old Order Amish—especially those from Ohio—also contribute.

with some parents. Three men lead this service, which consists of singing, recitation, and Bible lessons. In the morning, all the ministers gather at one place. They discuss church issues, needs, and dangers, and also decide which chapter of the Bible will be read in all the churches. This is an expression of brotherhood and promotes unity. By the time the ministers have returned to their home villages, it could be three or four o'clock when they begin their regular service. Children under 15 do not attend the regular service, which last 2.5 to 3 hours.

Funerals: Funerals are usually large, with many people from all five villages attending. In fact, it was the funeral of Evan Derkash, attended by several thousand people, that first attracted the attention of the Ukrainian press and the designation "Ukrainian Amish." At a funeral attended by members of Master's International Ministries, the body of the deceased was lying on a low table when they arrived. As people entered the room, a group of twelve sang for about 45 minutes. Before the services began, the body was placed in an unfinished coffin. Many people stood outside. The services lasted three hours, with two ministers each preaching for an hour. The singers and others sang a number of songs throughout the service. After a final viewing, the coffin was nailed shut and placed on a horse-drawn wagon. At the cemetery, hundreds of people stood around the open grave for more songs and prayers. The coffin was lowered, and a few handfuls of dirt were put in the grave, which was filled later. There was no funeral meal, but guests from other villages were served food in individuals' homes.

As one ponders the lives of these Plain believers, the following aspects present themselves as positive challenges for consideration:

- Their emphasis on holy living and victory over the sins of the Spirit
- Their simple faith and dependence on God for healing and direction. It appears they often ask God for guidance
- Their intense nurture of children
- Their reluctant use of the *Bann*, and their efforts in bringing back errant souls
- Their contentment with a very simple way of life
- Their earnest fervor and careful nurture of the Spirit, resulting in a meaningful expression of their faith