

# Researching Stalin's Victims

by Dave Obee

Brothers Robert and Sephrin Tiede should have been, to the rational mind, unlikely candidates for any plot to overthrow a government. In the 1930s they were peasants with young families, working on a collective farm in the Pulin area northwest of Zhitomir, Ukraine. Their roots in the area were deep; their grandfather, Michael Tiede, had come to the Pulin area from Poland 70 years earlier. But Robert and Sephrin had the misfortune of living in Ukraine under the regime of Josef Stalin, the dictator whose rule was delivered with an iron fist and terror. The Tiedes were both arrested by the Ukrainian NKVD in February, 1938, and taken to a jail in Zhitomir. Their families never saw them again.

The brothers were charged with being members of a counter-revolutionary organization and of carrying out counter-revolutionary activities. After they waited months in prison, their trials were relatively short and highly predictable. Both men were found guilty and sentenced to death. The sentences were carried out on Sept. 24, 1938, just four days after the verdicts were given, leaving little time for an appeal. Not that anyone would have dared to appeal, of course; 1938 was a particularly bloody year in the Zhitomir oblast with thousands of people being arrested and killed, or sent to a labor camp where death was almost as certain, but not as immediate.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, about 56,000 Germans were arrested by the NKVD in the Zhitomir area. It would be hard to find a family in 1930s Ukraine that was not touched in some way by Stalin's reign of terror. The Communist leader was remarkably democratic in his killing; opponents, supporters and people who didn't care either way were just as likely to be his victims. And Stalin's henchmen went after Ukrainians, Germans, Poles and just about every ethnic group found in the country. There are no hard numbers on the number of people killed by terror or starvation in Ukraine in the 1930s. The total number of dead is, however, well into the millions. It has been estimated that 90 per cent of the people sent to labor camps died there.

Research into the people who were killed or imprisoned during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s is possible using records of the NKVD and its successor organization, the KGB. (NKVD stands for *Narodnii Kommissariat Vnutrennykh Del*, or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs; KGB stands for *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*, or Committee of State Security.)

In the Zhitomir area, where the Tiede brothers were arrested, tried and executed, these records are held in the Zhitomir Oblast State Archive, which is in a building which formerly held the Communist Party archives. Not all of the NKVD files are held at the archives — it includes just those cases held by troikas, special committees and other non-judicial executive bodies which had no legal power to

sentence. The files of cases which were determined in proper courts — in other words, legally — have been retained by the KGB. The files held in the state archive are open to the public. An alphabetical card index, which is the key to access the files, is restricted to archive staff members. The staff members are, prompt in bringing files to the reading room.

The files are, for the most part, comprehensive. They include documents completed to justify an arrest; information on the arrest itself; a biographical sheet signed by the person arrested; a summary of the interrogation; testimony from witnesses; and documents showing the sentence and, if the sentence was execution, an attestation that it was carried out. Many of the files also contain photographs of the people who were arrested; they are standard prison mug shots, taken from the front and side, but in many cases they could be the only surviving photos of those people.

Old NKVD and KGB records are to be found in archives throughout Ukraine and Russia. Most have been indexed in some form. And several of the archives are producing printed guides to their holdings, which will be a tremendous aid to researchers. Access to the material varies in each archive, but in general, research must be done on site. That means genealogists will have to travel there or hire someone to do the research on their behalf.



Fig. 1 - Examples of KGB records

The files are comprehensive and generally in chronological order. For the average file, it will take at least an hour for a competent person to translate the key documents from Russian. It would pay to have a translator who is both comfortable with 60-year-old Russian handwriting, and familiar with the charges faced by the people arrested.

The Germans arrested and tried in the 1930s were generally charged under Article 54 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code, which deals with counter-revolutionary

crimes designed to overthrow, undermine or weaken Soviet power. Article 54 had 14 basic components:

Article 54-1: high treason

Article 54-2: bourgeois separatism and nationalism

Article 54-3: being an accomplice to enemy

Article 54-4: being an agent of the world bourgeoisie

Article 54-5: inciting a foreign power to declare war

Article 54-6: espionage

Article 54-7: conducting subversive activities

Article 54-8: terrorism

Article 54-9: committing acts of sabotage at transport, communications and water supply system

Article 54-10: conducting anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation

Article 54-11: being a member of an anti-Soviet organization

Article 54-12: not informing the Soviet authorities about forthcoming or already perpetrated counter-revolutionary crimes

Article 54-13: committing crimes against the working class or revolution movement

Article 54-14: committing economic sabotage and not fulfilling the duties in order to weaken the Soviet power.

The Ukrainian Article 54 was based on Article 58 of the Russian republic's criminal code, which is described in greater detail in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.

It doesn't take much browsing through the old NKVD files before they start to get quite predictable. Most of the Germans arrested were charged with 54-10 and 54-11. The charges may seem minor, but in Stalinist Ukraine, they were enough to earn someone a bullet in the brain. Sefhrin Tiede, for example, was charged under both 54-10 and 54-11. The 41-year-old from Wjasowitz was accused of being a member of a counter-revolutionary fascist organization, having held illegal meetings, having had contact with the German consulate in Kiev, and having formed counter-revolutionary organizations. He had also, the Soviets alleged, received money and material for counter-revolutionary acts.

These charges were typical of those faced by most of the Germans arrested — and as with so many other cases, Tiede's file revealed that the NKVD was remarkably short on specifics. There was no clear indication that the Soviets had any hard evidence to back up their statements. That didn't seem to matter, though, because guilty or not, Tiede ended up quite dead. For genealogists, a key ingredient in every file is the biographical information that was provided by the people arrested. The file of Albert Karl Reschke is a good example.

Reschke was one of the last people taken into custody after the Nazis invaded on June 22, 1941. Reschke was arrested by the NKVD on June 24 — and as a result of the lightning speed of the German *Wehrmacht*, the Soviets had to quickly move Reschke out of Zhitomir. He ended up in a jail in Shakhti, about 60 kilometres north of Rostov-on-Don in Russia. He was accused of carrying out anti-Soviet propaganda. As a result of the move to Shakhti, Reschke had

to be charged a second time, under Article 58 of the Russian criminal code. The charges were the same, despite the difference in the numbers.

Reschke was one of the lucky ones, in that he was sentenced to a labor camp and not sentenced to death. His file has no information on his fate in the camp system, where hundreds of thousands of people died over the years as a result of starvation and exhaustion.

The family information that Reschke provided to the authorities was impressive. He said he was born in 1885 in Kischelowka in the Baraschi region northwest of Zhitomir. In his household at the time of his arrest were his wife Sarah, 46, his mother-in-law Mary, 73, and his daughter Alicia, 14.

Лист №... 4  
и доку №...

### Анкета арестованного

1. Фамилия Решке  
2. Имя и отчество Альберт Карлович  
3. Дата рождения: число 1885 месяц ...  
4. Место рождения село Киселовка Барашевского района Житомирской области  
5. Местонахождение (адрес) село Киселовка Житомирской области, село Барашевское Житомирской области  
6. Профессия и специальность крестьянин - музыкант  
7. Место службы и должность или вид занятий Коллективист колхоза им. 1-го Интернационала  
(указать без сокращений, название предприятия или учреждения и характер производства)  
8. Паспорт И. И. И. И.  
(указать в каком органе выдан, номер и вид серии, ст. провозки)  
9. Социальное происхождение крестьянин - бедняк  
(указать род занятий родителей и их имущественное положение)  
10. Социальное положение Коллективист  
(указать вид занятий и имущественное положение арестованного)  
а) до революции крестьянин-бедняк, бедняк  
б) после революции крестьянин-бедняк середняк  
11. Образование (общее и специальное) материнское  
12. Партийность (в прошлом и настоящем) чл. с. изд. группы И. С. С.

Fig. 2 - Arrest form for Albert Karl Reschke

Reschke said that when he was 15, his mother died, and he had to go to work for a rich peasant. He served in the Tsar's army for two years, starting in 1909; and then worked for a rich peasant for a year. In 1913 he married Sarah, who was from Iwanowitsch, so they lived there for a while. In 1914 he was taken into the tsar's army again, and served until he was taken prisoner on March 6, 1915. He was initially sent to a camp in Austria, then moved to one in Germany for the duration of the war.

On his return to the Zhitomir area, he lived in the colony of Florowka until 1927, then moved to Iwanowitsch, a few kilometres to the east. He joined the collective farm in 1931.

The files may also contain information about the financial status of the people arrested. We learn, for example, that prior to the collectivization of agriculture, Reschke's brother-in-law, Arnold Friedrich Weiss, had 15

desiatins [about one hectare] of land, a house, two barns, agriculture machines, five or six cows, three horses, and regularly hired three workers.

Weiss was an unwilling participant in collectivization, as his interrogation shows:

Question: "You were arrested in 1931 as a kulak and exiled. We want evidence."

Weiss: "I was arrested in 1931 and escaped. I went to Omsk in exile for about three months, and returned in 1931. Before 1934 I worked in different places. In 1934 I returned to Iwanowitsch and worked in the collective farm."

Many of the files include plenty of information on other residents in each village. That is because the Soviet system of trials and terror was built on people implicating other people.

In some cases, the information given would be of little use to the Soviets — but genealogists could find it quite interesting. On August 2, 1941, for example, Albert Reschke was asked to tell the authorities about some of his friends in Iwanowitsch. Here is what he said:

"Meisner Adolf is a German. He works at the collective farm. He has lived in Iwanowitsch for a long time. He was in Siberia and came back to Iwanowitsch in 1931.

"Schneider Wladislaw worked in the collective farm. Before the collective he worked as a shoemaker.

"Reimer Josef worked in different light jobs because of his age. Before the collective he lived in Wjasowitz. In Iwanowitsch before the collective, he had no property. He had two sons, one is Hermann, who was arrested in 1934 because he stole grain. I have no idea about his location today.

"Hartmann David worked in the collective farm and belongs to middle-class peasantry.

"Hartmann Hermann is a peasant, he belongs to the middle-class peasantry. His son Hartmann Hermann was accused of speculation.

"Schlender Theodor worked in the collective. Before the collective he worked in the Donetsk area as a miner. His wife Schlender Natalie works in the collective.

"Shielke Assaf Gottlieb — before the collective he had a mutual estate with his father-in-law Neumann. His father-in-law was a kulak. During the collective time he was deprived of his property and exiled to Siberia."

The records in the NKVD files would indicate that the Communists had a relatively easy time getting people to confess. Consider, for instance, the interrogation of Robert Tiede in the NKVD barracks in Zhitomir on Feb. 26, 1938:

Question: "You carried out counter-revolutionary propaganda activities."

Tiede: "I never carried out any propaganda. I am not guilty."

Question: "You lie. We know you are guilty of it."

Tiede: "No. I am not a member of any organization, and I have not carried out any propaganda."

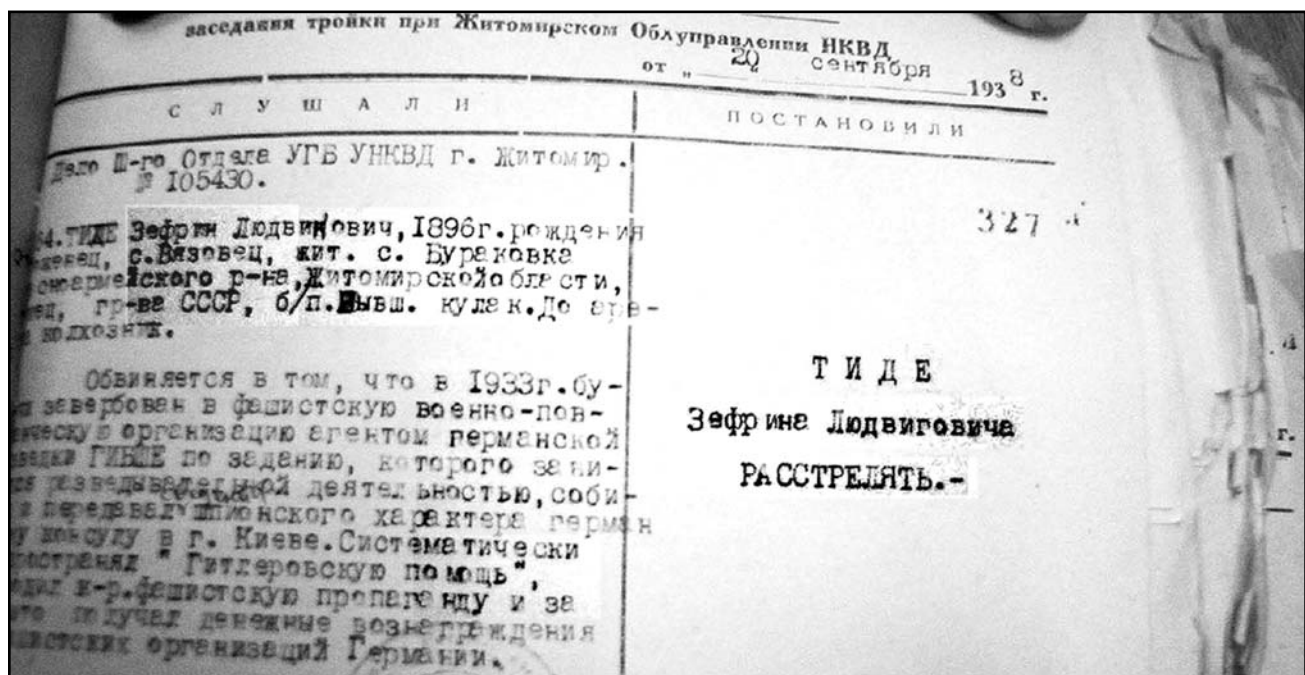
Tiede had proclaimed his innocence twice, and then it was the turn of NKVD Lieut. Baumann to get involved in the interrogation.

Question: "You tell us — you are lying again. You can't lie to us ... Yes or no — were you are member of a counter-revolutionary fascist organization in Pulin and the Wolodarsk district?"

Something about Baumann's approach changed Tiede's mind. Consider what he said next:

Tiede: "I acknowledge that I tried to conceal some facts about counter-revolutionary organizations in the Pulin -

Fig. 3 - Documentation of Sephrin Tiede's execution by firing squad



Chernigov - Wolodarsk area, but after some thought I have decided I have no choice. I have decided to tell everything. I am a member of the counter-revolutionary organization since 1932. Lebudski Assaf put me in the organization. Lebudski Assaf Emil in Solodyri. In 1935 he came to Iwanowitsch. He visited the German consulate in Kiev. In 1936 he was arrested because of counter-revolutionary activity and sent away. His father Lebudski Emil went to Germany in 1933.”

Question: “When did you become a member of a counter-revolutionary fascist organization?”

Tiede: “Because of property of my father. He was a rich peasant. I was expelled off my property in 1929 and afterward had a negative attitude toward the Soviet power and carried out anti-Soviet propaganda among the German population. Lebudski invited me to his place and I started to visit frequently. We had counter-revolutionary talks. In a 1932 talk he told me we lived badly but we were to be liberated by Germany because of the coming war. Later he told me of his visit to the German consulate in Kiev with his wife. The German diplomat gave him the task of organizing a counter-revolutionary fascist organization among the German population. He was to agitate against the Soviet power. He was fulfilling that task.

“He also proposed I join the counter-revolutionary organization. I agreed, so I ended up a member of the counter-revolutionary organization.”

But Tiede was just getting started. When asked for names of other people involved in counter-revolutionary work, he quickly rattled off the names and approximate ages of 10 of his neighbors. He identified Gustav Zander, 45; Reinhold Schulz, 45; and Friedrich Domke, 50; all of Solodyri, as being involved in his organization. Working with them were seven people from Iwanowitsch: Hermann Hartmann, 40; Richard Hartmann, 35; David Reschke, 40; Ephraim Bonikowsky, 43; Gustav Bonikowsky, 50; Hermann Tiedtke, 70; and Gustav Tiedtke, 74. Tiede’s newfound willingness to co-operate with the authorities didn’t help him. Along with his brother, Sefhrin, he was found guilty and sentenced to death on Sept. 20, 1938. The sentences was carried out four days later.

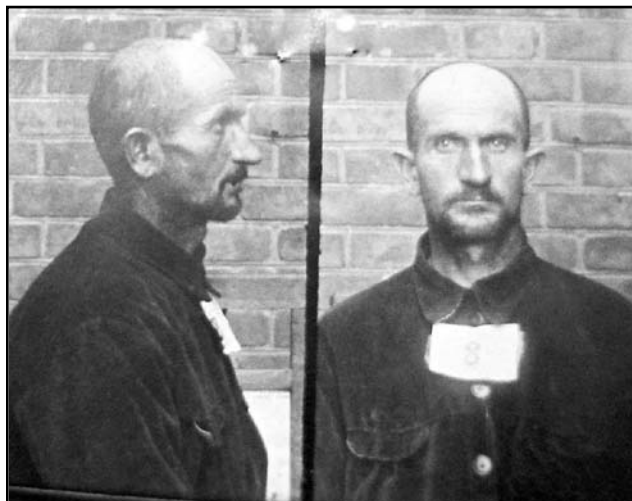
Why did Tiede, and so many other prisoners, suddenly decide to tell all? Especially when, in most cases, they were guilty of nothing? There are several possible answers, but they likely lie in the interrogation methods used by NKVD officers. They had ways to extract the words they wanted from their captives. The NKVD based interrogations on the concept of securing confessions, with prisoners admitting their own guilt and implicating others. It was far easier to get prisoners to admit to crimes than to prove these imaginary crimes had ever happened.

Since there was no doubt about the final outcome, why did Soviets bother with a pretense of a trial? Did the Soviets devote the time and effort needed to interrogate prisoners, to move them from one jail to another, to feed them until they were shot, and to record the words they spoke during their fake trials? The trials were needed to give the campaign of

murder and terror a measure of legitimacy. The confessions were needed to make the trials go more quickly. Histories of the Stalin years indicate that these confessions were obtained in a variety of ways. The NKVD would sometimes interrogate a prisoner for hours on end, not allowing him to sleep, eat or drink. At times, these sessions were held over several weeks or months — as long as was needed to break the prisoner.

A faster method was to simply beat the prisoner until the confession was extracted. Sometimes a person was beaten to a piece of meat in front of 10 or 15 other people. After that, the people were asked if they wanted to give evidence. If no one agreed, another person was beaten to a pulp, and so on. Eventually, someone would volunteer to speak.

A crucial part of most of the interrogations was the demand for the names of other people who had also been working against the Soviet system. Prisoners were asked to speak out against friends, neighbors and relatives. The NKVD found many people willing to help them in their campaigns of death. In reading the files, some names appear



*Fig. 4 - Arnold Weiss, executed as a critic of the collective farm; posthumously declared innocent on 8 October, 1958*

over and over, as the same people testify against people from their villages. This assistance was rewarded by the NKVD. The informants themselves were not arrested, and the rumour in the villages was that the informants were being paid for the information they were providing.

Going through the files for residents of the Iwanowitsch-Solodyri area, two names keep appearing: David Adolf Mertin and Adolf Meisner. Both men kept themselves busy, telling the Soviets all about the real or imagined sins of their neighbors.

At times, the NKVD’s informants did more than just provide testimony. They were allowed to face their victims in the court and make their accusations part of the official record. When Arnold Weiss was being interrogated, David Mertin was invited to take part. Mertin said that before 1930 Weiss was a kulak, had on occasion found fault with the

collective in Iwanowitsch, and had praised individual initiative.

“In a collective farm, you work hard and have nothing,” Mertin quoted Weiss as saying. Weiss was then asked if he disputed what Mertin said.

“I do not admit it. I and the other kulaks were not carrying out such a thing in 1930,” he said. “Do you admit you were carrying out counter-revolutionary propaganda?” “I don’t remember,” Weiss replied.

Beyond the unmentionable encouragement that was being given to the prisoners while they were being interrogated, there is no doubt that the official record — the one in the files — is usually incomplete. Consider, for example, this questioning of Albert Reschke on August 11, 1941:

Question: “Have you ever been a member of a religious community?”

Reschke: “Before 1934 I was a member of the Baptist community. A lot of neighbours were Baptists. In 1934 the Baptist community disappeared. The house where we met was occupied by the collective as a barn for grain. Besides, in 1935 our pastor Hornbacher Eduard left the colony and went to Zhitomir. There is no pastor in Iwanowitsch any more.”

Question: “What was your task as a member of the Baptist community?”

Reschke: “Before 1931 I was the leader of the choir. After that, regular services were not taking place because we were busy in the collective.”

Question: “We know that while in Iwanowitsch you systematically expressed a hostile attitude to life in the Soviet Union and often glorified life in fascist Germany. Explain it.”

Reschke: “I did not express any negative emotion regarding life in the USSR, and I did not glorify life in fascist Germany. That’s all, I cannot give you any evidence concerning that.”

Question: “Who is Bunkowski Eduard and Nickel? What relation did you have?”

Reschke: “Before the collective Bunkowski Eduard was a rich peasant and lived in Neudorf, 10 kilometres from Iwanowitsch. Nickel Hermann lives in Iwanowitsch and works in the collective Third International. Before the collective, he was a middle-class peasant. I had no relations with Bunkowski Edward and don’t know where he lives. I had contact with Nickel, we worked together. I had no other relations with him.”

Question: “Did Hornbacher Eduard and Bunkowski Eduard visit your place? When? Why?”

Reschke: “Pastor Hornbacher Eduard often visited my place as a friend. Bunkowski Eduard never visited my home.”

Question: “We know Hornbacher and Bunkowski were persecuted by the Soviet power and at that time they found shelter in your home.”

Reschke: “They were never hidden in my house. It’s a lie. Pastor Hornbacher went to Zhitomir. He rented a horse

wagon for that purpose. I can’t tell anything about Bunkowski. Perhaps he was repressed by Soviet power, but he has never hidden in my house. I deny it.”

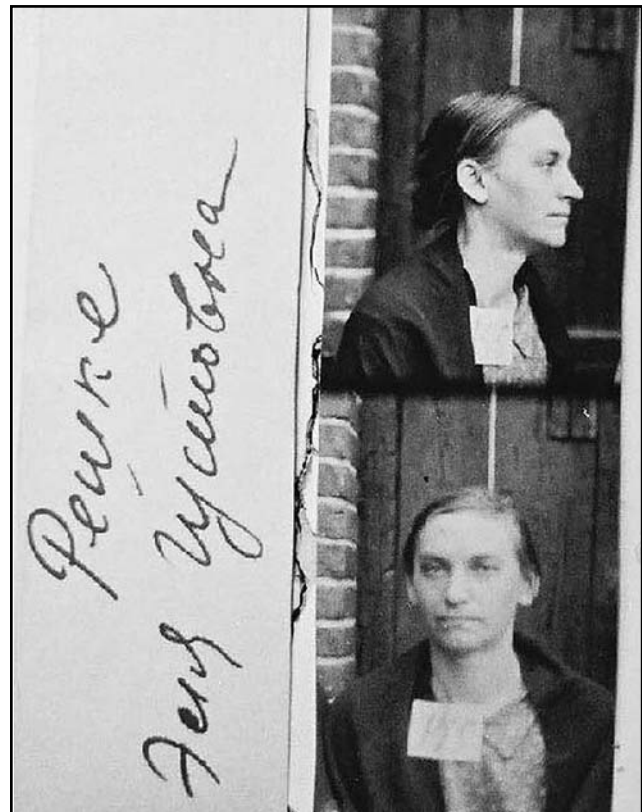
If the minutes of the interrogation are to be believed, that exchange amounting to just 335 words in English, lasted 155 minutes, from 1:25 p.m. to 4 p.m.

It’s hard to understand why some of the people arrested were allowed freedom as long as they did. Richard Gustav Tiedtke of Solodyri is one example. Tiedtke was from a wealthy family, and had already spent time in custody for carrying out propaganda and listening to radio programs from Germany. His father was sentenced to a concentration camp in 1936 for having contacts with people from abroad, and his brother was also jailed. Tiedtke readily admitted receiving money from relatives in Germany and America, and admitted that he was a member of a counter-revolutionary organization that had been organized by the school teacher in Solodyri. The organization was apparently known as the Union of Young Strong Germans.

He was arrested on Sept. 5, 1937. The final straw appeared to be the fact that he had hosted a party. “The party was organized for no purpose other than we had finished the agricultural work in the hops plantation,” Tiedtke said during his interrogation.

Several witnesses told the NKVD about the party. Guests included Adam Kuhn, August Schulz, the manager of the collective and anti-Soviet agitators. It was claimed that Tiedtke had told several people that it was a pity that

*Fig. 5 - Ella Reschke: five years at the Marinsk concentration camp; final fate is unknown*



Red Army leaders Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Ion Yakir had been killed, suggesting instead that Stalin and a senior Communist official, Kliment Voroshilov, should have been killed.

It was also alleged that Tiedtke had destroyed the hops plantation in the collective. One witness said that the crop would have been worth 30,000 roubles to the collective, 30,000 roubles it would not get because of what Tiedtke did. There is no indication in the file about how one man would go about destroying the crop. On Sept. 16, 1937, Tiedtke was sentenced to be shot. The sentence was carried out at 12:49 p.m. on Sept. 29, just 26 days after the fateful party.

And then there was Auguste Weiss of Solodyri. Not related to Arnold of Iwanowitsch, Auguste was the wife of Richard Weiss, who was shot as a German spy on Oct. 29, 1937. Besides her unfortunate choice of spouse, Auguste's greatest crime was that she was not a good parent. Her file said her children were little devils, and added that the children had been selling furniture to the neighbours. Whatever the reason, Auguste was exiled to a concentration camp in Kazakhstan for five years.

At times, the Soviets showed a remarkable sense of caring. Consider the cases of David Jonathon Reschke and his wife, Ella. David was arrested in 1937. He was accused of having sent letters about the situation in the Soviet Union to a brother in North America as well as to Bernhard Goetze, a Baptist pastor in Poland who had served in Iwanowitsch before the First World War. It was also claimed that Reschke had received money from abroad and carried out propaganda about a future war. It appears Reschke wasn't shy about expressing his opinions. "He told me, 'Let the stupid people work in the collective'," one witness told his trial. Another witness quoted Reschke as saying "there are enough stupid people to work for the Soviet power, but I do not want to work." David was shot on Nov. 26, 1937.

Ella was arrested two weeks after her husband. The NKVD alleged that she had known about her husband's counter-revolutionary activities, and charged her under article 54-12. She was eventually found guilty, and sentenced to five years in the Marinsk concentration camp. The file has no information about whether she survived.

But before the Soviets could send the two Reschkes off to their fates, there was a slight problem: seven-year-old Edith, their only child. The NKVD fired off a letter to the village council in Iwanowitsch, asking whether Edith was alright. The village council responded that yes, Edith was in good hands; she was living with her aunt. With the council's letter to comfort them, the NKVD proceeded with its plan to kill Edith's parents.

Edith survived the terrible 1930s, ending up after the war in Kazakhstan. And, half a century after her parents were arrested, she made another appearance in her parents' files. "Have you got the possibility of paying some compensation?" Edith asked in a 1989 letter to the KGB. "We lived in a collective farm. My parents had a private house and some property, all was confiscated except my clothes, which was thrown to me through a window. They

wanted to send me to an orphan house but my grandmother asked them to give me to her house and I was living with her. I was the only child of my parents."

The KGB responded in a variety of ways. It asked residents of Iwanowitsch if anybody remembered the Reschkes, but nobody did. This should not surprise us, considering that the Germans who lived there in the 1930s were in the West, in Kazakhstan, or were dead. It also sent a formal letter to Edith to tell her what it knew about the fate of her parents. It ordered a death certificate for her father to be issued by the registry office in Chernigov, north of Zhitomir. And it started the process to have Edith's parents "rehabilitated" — basically, to have them found innocent, posthumously.

There is one notable thing that the KGB apparently did not do. If Edith was awarded any compensation, there is no hint of it in the files. Many of the files contain letters from descendants of the people arrested. Most were written in the late 1980s from Kazakhstan, where the families were moved after the Second World War. Two of Arnold Weiss's children, Arthur and Helga, wrote individual letters to the KGB in 1989, asking for information on the fate of their father. In response, the KGB provided information from Arnold's file and added the two new letters to it. These modern-day letters can help researchers find distant cousins, who can provide even more information on what happened to the family.

Most people have individual files. In some cases, two people are included in one file; an example is Albert Reschke, who shares a file with a man arrested on the same day and taken away in the same truck.

The two Tiedes are included in a 26-volume criminal case, number 7605, that covers 350 people. They were allegedly all part of a secret German fascist organization that had been carrying out anti-Soviet propaganda since 1923. The 26 volumes are generally divided by type of document rather than by person — so there could be references to one person in as many as a dozen volumes.

Several of the volumes have comprehensive lists of the people, including birth place and year, which makes searching relatively easy. On Oct. 8, 1958, it was decided that all 350 people in the case were, in fact, not guilty of the crimes. As a result, they were rehabilitated; the Soviets cleared their names.

Unfortunately, this bit of rational thinking came about half a century too late for Robert Tiede, Sefhrin Tiede, and the 348 others.

#### **Case numbers**

Reschke, Albert Karl — 24834  
Reschke, David Jonathon — 23424  
Reschke, Ella Gustav — 19946  
Tiede, Robert Ludwig — 7605  
Tiede, Sefhrin Ludwig — 7605  
Tiedtke, Richard Gustav — 20207  
Weiss, Arnold Friedrich — 26285  
Weiss, Auguste Julius — 27293