Cultural Environment Plan for Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka in Ukraine

- With cultural heritage as a compass





Dnr: 2025-109-1

Authors:

Eva Selin, Gotland Museum, Department of Cultural Heritage Sofia Hoas, Project Manager, Gotland Museum Peter Knutas, Project Manager, Gotland Museum Black-and-white photos: Föreningen Svenskbyborna, unless otherwise stated Color photos: Sofia Hoas, unless otherwise stated Translation: Kathleen Gow-Sjöblom

251027 © Gotlands Museum Strandgatan 14 621 56 Visby

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Vision and Aims	4
The Historic Background of the Location of the Village	5
The Svenskbybor's and Zmijivkas Historic Background	6
Hiiumaan Swedes	6
Hiiumaa Became Russian	7
The Establishment of Gammalsvenskby	8
The Pioneer Period	9
The Village in the 19 th Century	10
30 Years of Prosperity	15
Ukraine Annexed by the Soviet Union	18
Home to Sweden in 1929	20
Returnees to Gammalsvenskby	21
The Second World War	22
The Post War Period	24
The Period Following Ukraine's Independence in 1991	26
The Russian Invasion	30
Gammalsvenskby's buildings 1991-2022	37
Public Buildings	44
Public Buildings and Monuments	52
What are the Prerequisites for the Villagers to Return? Survey	54
Establishment Opportunities	58
Agriculture	58
Tourism	59
The Blasting of the Kachovka Dam	60
Water	61
IT-Companies in the Rural Areas	62
Sustainable and Innovative Solutions	63
Cooperation between the Public and Civil Community	63
Experiences from Similar Projects	65
Strategy for the Dissesmination of the Cultural Environmental Plan	66
Sources	67

Introduction

With this document, we wish to inspire villagers and visitors to return, and local councils, investors and other interested parties to contribute to the reconstruction of the village in different ways.

Gammalsvenskby is situated beside the River Dnipro in Kherson Oblast, in southern Ukraine. The village was established and developed by the Hiiumaan Swedes in 1782 in connection with the Russian colonisation of southern Ukraine. They retained their Swedish language and traditions. Three German villages were later established in the 19th century. Today the villages are known collectively as Zmijivka. Most Swedes left Gammalsvenskby in 1929, but some remained. In the Soviet era, the village was partially destroyed and new Soviet houses were built. The village became part of independent Ukraine in 1991. The village has been badly hit by Russia's full-scale invasion. First, it was occupied for nine months and has since then been badly bombed by Russia. The village has now been largely deserted and is almost completely in ruins. This cultural environment plan aims to create faith in the future by planning, preserving and developing the cultural heritage as a basis and driving force for the reconstruction and long-term development of the village. It is important to understand the village identity, its origins and history, both for those living there and for visitors.

This document has been produced in 2025 by the Gotland Museum's project, Gammalsvenskby's Cultural Heritage, financed by the Swedish Government via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The contents have been produced with the aid of Gotland Museum's Cultural Environment Development Department, Beryslav Raion, interviews with Zmijivka inhabitants and other experts on Gammalsvenskby or on cultural heritage.

The idea behind this was to supplement the reconstruction plan drawn up by Beryslav, in cooperation with the Association of Ukrainian Cities 2022, which includes the essential infrastructure. The plan, however, was rendered obsolete when the village was later totally destroyed. There are, however, new plans for the reconstruction of the entire district, which have been produced by US Aid and others, and are more up-to-date.

Vision and Aims

The objective of the production of a development plan is to create faith in the future and hope amongst the population. That one day, they will be able to return to a village that is attractive to live in, and rebuild their lives. Simultaneously, the village will continue to be an interesting and vibrant destination for visitors.

The objective is to produce a cultural environment plan with focus on cultural heritage and rural development, with the aim of cautiously rebuilding Gammalsvenskby with due respect to its unique cultural heritage, both as an important component of the inhabitants' identity and as an attractive destination for visitors.

The Historic Background of the Location of the Village

The site of Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka has been populated and used by people for thousands of years. There are traces of human presence from as early as in the Stone Age, when huntergatherers settled beside rivers and hunting grounds. For thousands of years, different nomadic and equestrian peoples have moved across the steppe, including Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Khazars and Crimean Tatars, who have all left imprints on the landscape. Clear evidence of the prehistoric significance can be found in the large burial mound in the village centre, called Storbacka. It is known as a kurgan, a Scythian tumulus from the Iron Age, from about 700-300 B.C., raised over prominent people. These graves were used both for burials and as landmarks, clearly visible way across the open steppe landscape. Several similar tumuli can be found in the steppe beyond the village.

Later, the district was incorporated into the powerful Kievan Rus', which emerged in the 9th century under the leadership of Rurik, the Swedish chieftain who became the founder of the Rurik dynasty, which ruled there for hundreds of years. The River Dnipro, which flows past Zmijivka, was an important part of the trade route which connected the North with the Black Sea. There were thus Swedish connections with the region long before the Svenskbybor established Gammalsvenskby in 1782.

During the Medieval Period, the region became a frontier between different superpowers – including the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate. Remains of a Turkish fortress, called Staroshvedkse or Stadsbacke in Swedish, can be found on a hilltop between today's Zmijivka and the River Dnipro, reminding us of the region's strategic significance.

As from the 16th century, the Ukrainian Cossacks emerged as an independent force in the area. They lived in villages called Sich and defended themselves against the Turks, Tatars and Russians. In the early 18th century, the region became indirectly affected by the Great Northern War of 1700-1721, when Sweden and Russia vied for power in the Baltic Sea Regions. One important event was the Battle at Poltava in 1709, when the Swedish army under the command of Karl XII, along with the Ukrainian Cossack leader, Ivan Mazepa, were defeated by the Russians. Following their defeat, Karl XII and Mazepa fled to the south. Despite defeat, Karl XII's defence against Russian made a strong impression on many Cossacks, who nursed a positive view of the Swedes for a long period of time.

Once Russia had defeated the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate in the war of 1768-1774, the Russian Empire assumed formal control of large parts of southern Ukraine. The region, where Gammalsvenskby is situated, was incorporated through the peace treaty in Küçük Kaynarca in 1774. It became part of what is known as Novorossija, 'New Russia'. The Empress, Catherine II (Catherine the Great) and the prince Potemkin subsequently embarked on an extensive colonisation, where colonialists were called in from different parts of Europe to populate the newly acquired regions. The colonisation was often organised by the army or local authorities, which parcelled land and divided it among the colonists. The Cossacks in the region were granted new roles as border guards in the imperial service. When the Svenskbybor arrived in 1782, they were said to have been cordially greeted by the local

Cossacks. The positive view of Swedes lived on, not least thanks to Karl XII's struggles against Russian and the alliance with Mazepa. The Cossacks helped the Swedes to settle down and to build temporary housing by way of zemljankor, i.e. dugouts or earth-houses dug into the ground and with a roof.

The Svenskbybor's and Zmijivkas Historic Background

The Svenskbybor are a group of people originating from the village Gammalsvenskby in today's Ukraine. Most of them were Swedish farmers from the island of Hiiumaa, just off the Estonian coast, but there were also prisoners-of-war from Sweden and German colonists. Today, all spouses of native Swedes and their offspring are considered as Svenskbybor. The Svenskbybors' family names, such as Knutas, Hoas, Hinas, Buskas, Kotz, Malmas, Sigalet, Annas, Albers, Mutas, Hansas, Utas, Martis, Tinis, Portje, Bush are unique and derive from their farms in Hiiumaa.

Hiiumaan Swedes

The Svenskbybors forefathers were residents of Dagö, just off the Estonian coast, for several hundred years. They probably came from the eastern part of the Nyland (Uusimaa) coast in Finland some time in the 13th century. At that time, this region was part of the Swedish Empire. Indications of Uusimaan lineage are: the dialect is similar to the Eastern Swedish dialect which is spoken in Eastern Uusimaa, the local costume is identical to the Uusimaan peasant costumes and the Hiiumaan Swedish runic calendar, which adheres to the saints' calendar compiled by the bishop in Åbo.

In 1228, the north end of Hiiumaa was described as a wasteland or desolate island. The conflicts of the Crusades had probably driven the islanders to flight, or perhaps they had been killed. Christianity was accomplished in 1254, and the island was divided between the newly established diocese Saaremaa-Wiek, which was granted the western region and The Teutonic Order, which was granted the eastern region. That year, there were a few villages in existence in Hiiumaa. They were probably Estonian villages with colonists from the neighbouring island of Saaremaa. There might have been a Swedish settlement in the late 13th or early 14th century. Swedish occupation may have taken place after 1343, when the large Estonian peasant revolt was crushed. This led to the desolation of the Estonian villages, which paved the way for Swedish fishermen-farmers to settle there. But, as was mentioned in the introduction, the Finnish Eastern Uusimaa is singled out as being the domicile of these Hiiumaan Swedes. A fact that is also expressed in statements from the 17th and 18th centuries. Fishermen-farmers are claimed to have been granted the right to settlement in return for taxes paid with fish. Perhaps the Hanseatic League, the merchant organisation, played some role in this occupancy. It was of utmost importance to have properly Christianised inhabitants along the fairways, who could be of assistance at shipwrecks and pilot the ships when necessary. Delivery of fish, for example, was extremely important for the church on days of fasting.

Life in Hiiumaa

Gradually, the Hiiumaan Swedes also began to engage in agriculture, even though most of them were always in proximity of the coast for fishing and hunting. Several of them became jack-of-all-

trades. They settled in the two northernmost fiscal districts (vackor) in Hiiumaa. These districts were named after their main villages – Röicks (Reigi) and Kiertil (Kärdla). The Hiiumaan Swedes are first mentioned in records in 1470, when the Teutonic Order's bailiff, who lived at Soneburg Castle in the north of Saaremaa, issued a charter for the Swedes in Hiiumaa with exemption from all boon work duties in return for an annual fee of 20 Riga marks. Notwithstanding, the Estonians continued to be in servitude. In 1508, the Swedish places of residence were restricted to the two fiscal areas in the north; any Swede who settled outside these regions was regarded as an Estonian in servitude. Certain changes occurred for the Hiiumaan Swedes during the Northern Seven Years' War (1563-1570). The Teutonic Order domination came to an end and the regions of Wiek (Lääne County) and Hiiumaa were conquered by Swedish troops. At this time, 1565, about 630 people lived in Hiiumaa in the two 'vackor' – fiscal districts. They earned their living as smallholders, engaging in fishing, seal hunting, agriculture and livestock farming. Some farmers produced tar and mortar for sale. They also built ships and were skippers who traded in towns around the Baltic Sea, like most other Swedish coastal dwellers.

The Noblemen's Lease

The Northern Seven Years' War found Sweden at war with Denmark, Lübeck and Poland. Through the peace treaty of Stettin in 1570, Sweden lost Skåne, but had conquered Hiiumaa. As remuneration, the noblemen, who fought for Sweden, were granted fiefs or confiscated land was sold. This resulted in the Estonian Swedish farmers becoming subjugated to Swedish and German feudal lords between 1590 and 1630 in pace with the noblemen being enfeoffed with more and more land by the Crown. Some Estonian Swedish villages were razed to the ground when noblemen built their estates.

Count Jacob de la Gardie was granted the fiefdom of Hiiumaa in 1620 and purchased the island four years later. From having been privileged Swedish freeholders, the inhabitants then became tenant farmers under a private owner, who assumed the right to demand the same taxes both from Swedes and Estonian serfs. A large Estonian village, Körgessaare, southwest of Röicks (Reigi), the Swedes' largest village, was razed to make room for the Hohenholm Estate. With the establishment of Röicks Parish in 1627, the villages were transferred to the Hohenholm Estate for tax purposes.

When Axel-Julius De la Gardie inherited Hiiumaa from his father in 1655, the farmers' situation deteriorated. In 1659, he retracted their right to conduct independent trading in mortar and cattle. Thus began an uninterrupted series of legal processes, where the Swedes, through an elected representative, tried to gain support from the King to allow them to retain their independent status. The Estonian Swedish districts, including Hiiumaa, were returned to the Crown through Karl XI's Great Reduction of the 1690s, and the farmers became 'crown farmers' – tenant farmers who paid tax to the Crown. Hiiumaa remained under Swedish rule until 1710.

Hiiumaa Became Russian

The Great Northern War broke out in 1700 and farmers were forced to send boatsmen to the Swedish navy. In 1710, the final Swedish troops in the Baltic surrendered. Russia assumed control and following the Treaty of Nystad in 1721, the Baltic provinces formally became Russian

territory. In the wake of the war, a bout of bubonic plague broke out in the Baltic provinces in 1710-1711, when one third of the Swedish population in Hiiumaa died.

Hiiumaa was governed by the Russian Monarchy from 1721 to 1755. During this period, the island was leased to various officers and noblemen. In 1740, serfdom was introduced in Estonia, but the Swedes could still assert their personal independence. In 1755, the estate was returned to Axel Julius' granddaughter, Ebba Margareta de la Gardie, married Stenbock. For some reason, the Swedish village of Kardla was exempted and remained part of the state-owned Padras. The estate was leased to German noblemen and remained Russian until 1799. The inhabitants of this village were never granted permission to emigrate to Ukraine in 1781. The new estate owner of Röicks began to treat all her subjects as serfs. This led to social unrest, which augmented in the 1770s. When her son, Karl Magnus Stenbock inherited the Hohenholm estate, he even dismissed the Swedes, and attempted to evict them in 1779. The Hiiumaan farmers fought for their freedom and Count Stenbock was obliged to acquiesce. The troublesome farmers, however, were dismissed. 117 farmers and 8 crofters were obliged to move out by March 1781 at the latest.

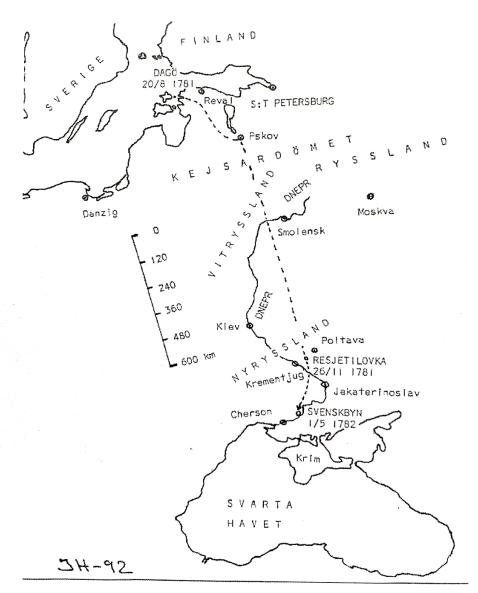
Following a legal ruling, which Karl Magnus Stenbock lost, the estate in Hiiumaa was sold to Baron Otto Reinhold Ludvig von Ungern-Sternberg. Ungern-Stenberg wished to reach some kind of settlement with the Swedes, but by then the whole matter had roused the attention of the imperial court. The ruler, Grigorij Potemkin, who assumed full responsibility for the entire newly-conquered New Russian province by Turkey, had promised the Empress Catherine II that he would populate and reclaim the land in the province. In 1762, a manifesto was issued inviting people of different nationalities to settle in Russia. The farmers were offered extremely advantageous conditions such as tax exemption, housing and provisions, etc, as well as permanent exemption from military conscription. More than 100 colonies were established in the steppes in the Volga region between 1765 and 1770. Most of them were German. At the behest of Potemkin, the Empress issued a 'ukas' – an edict – that the Hiiumaan Swedes would be relocated to the shores of the River Dnipro.

On 10th August 1781, at least 967 people left Hiiumaa, half of whom were women, to embark on a long trek to what was called the 'Novorossiya Governorate' (New Russia) in present day Ukraine. A company of soldiers from the Kasan cavalry under the command of Captain Makaretov would accompany the caravan of people. The Hiiumaan Swedes took along horses, draught animals and carts. The trek passed through Estonia and Latvia (then Livland) through Belarus via Pskov, down to Resjetilovka, where the winter camp was set up. It was in use until April the following year.

The Establishment of Gammalsvenskby

535 Swedes arrived at their new abode on 1st May 1782; only a few were children or elderly. The trek had been extremely harsh, partly because it took place in the winter, partly because of smallpox among the children and other epidemics which caused recurring misery. At least 345 people had died during the trek. At their designated location there was nothing of all that had been promised; no newly-built houses and no ready-sown fields. The colonisation began slowly.

At first, they lived in dugouts, Cossack style; these so-called Zemljankor comprised four walls, three of which were dug into the ground and often merely comprised soil. The 127 households from Hiiumaa, however, were granted land for 200 families, which meant that several landless younger brothers were allocated the same acreage of land as their elder brothers. Each of these families received 60 dessiatins (c. 65 ha) of land to cultivate, making a total of 12,000 dessiatins (c. 13,000 ha). The administrative centre was called Beryslav and the colony or village came to be called Svedska kolonija. The first settlement stretched from Gammalsvenskby up towards what would become the German village of Klosterdorf, some twenty years later. Windmills were built on higher level land south-southwest of the village; this would later become Mühlhausendorf.



Map showing the trek from Dagö/Hiiumaa till Svenskbyn/Zmiivka. Jörgen Hedman 1992.

The Pioneer Period

During the first years, mortality was high, particularly due to gastrointestinal diseases, and in March 1783 only 135 people were still alive; 71 men and 64 women. Ten years later, a small group of Swedish prisoners-of-war from Gustav III's war against Russia were transferred to the

village. They had been released from their prisoner-of-war camp in Crimea, on condition that they settled in Russia. Four of them married Svenskby women and remained in the village, giving rise to the names Norberg, Hernberg and Westberg.

At the new settlement, farmers were confronted with unfamiliar conditions. The climate was different with humid, tropical heat and long periods of drought. Within agriculture, it was necessary to try out new crops. Fishing also presented new challenges with a different type of fish, such as sturgeon and carp, but they gradually learned new methods of fishing.

Some years later, the monastery Grigorijevskij Bizukov Monastyr was established north of Gammalsvenskby, at the location of the Zaporozhian Cossacks' fortress. The monastery was an important outpost for the Russian Orthodox faith. It was once the foremost monastery in Ukraine next to Kyjiv Pechersk Lavra in Kyjiv. It was known for its astounding beauty, with large buildings and gardens. And they helped the settlers to rectify their situation in their new colonies. Within short, a rectory was built in Gammalsvenskby. A simple timber cruciform church was built next to the rectory in 1787. The church could seat 200 people, and was in existence for 100 years. Between 1782 and 1788, Gammalsvenskby had its own priest, but when the reverend Johan Adolph Europaeus left the village, the parishioners were annexed to the German parish in Josefsthal. A large churchyard was established in the early 19th century, just southwest of the rectory. In 1799, the New Russian Guardianship Office was set up under the supervision of Chief Justice Samuel Contenius, who was German. It was intended to control all foreign colonies in the New Russian Governorate, and assist the newly-founded colonies with advice, practical aid, funding and goods. The Swedish colonists and prisoners-of-war, according to the Contenius report, diligently took good care of their farming. They grew wheat, barley and eye, but experienced difficult agricultural conditions on land at high levels, which was exposed to drought and steppe rats. The pasturelands on the islets in the River Dnipro, however, were good, and the villagers were successful in their fishing. The village then had 148 inhabitants.

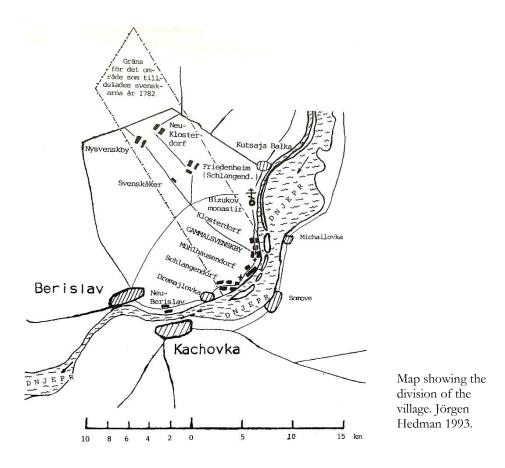


Map from The French National Archives.

The Village in the 19th Century

According to records from 1801, six people were fishermen, five were farmers, two were joiners, one was a blacksmith, one was an innkeeper and as many as 13 were weavers. The New Russian

Guardianship Office knew that there was a market for woven cloth and had aided in the acquisition of weaving looms. Contenius, however, was more critical one year later. The forest and the fertile meadows and horticulture were not worked satisfactorily, and inebriety had increased. However, in 1803 it was reported that fishing was profitable and they practised net and seine fishing. They caught pike, perch, roach and bream. The fish was salted or dried. In the same year, an intensive campaign was started to stimulate migration to New Russia from many different countries. At that time, the Swedish colony had 191 inhabitants. In 1804, German colonists arrived and established three new villages, Mühlhausendorf with 16 families from Austria and Würtenburg, and in 1805 Schlangendorf with 20 families from Prussia, Pomerania and Schlesien. Both villages were situated south and southwest of Gammalsvenskby. There was already a small windmill at Mühlhausendorf, as well as a house which had been owned by one of the Hiiumaan Swedes. Houses were erected in a single row in Schlangendorf. Klosterdorf was established in 1805 north of Gammalsvenskby, with 33 Catholic families from Bohemia, Baden, Mainz and Kurpfaltz. The new villages were allotted land which had originally belonged to Gammalsvenskby. This meant that the Hiiumaan Swedes only had access to 1/4 of their original land, which led to radical changes in agricultural conditions with an acute shortage of land. More and more became landless and had to make a living as day labourers. In 1816, there were 193 inhabitants and 40 families in Gammalsvenskby.



In 1819, a Guardianship Office was established in every district where there were colonies for foreign settlers with a directive to develop and stimulate new industries. Gammalsvenskby adhered to the office in Kherson. One industry was the acquisition of merino sheep, which led to a sharp increase in the breed. Sometime later, there were almost 950 sheep in the district, 176 of

which were merino sheep. Another initiative was to create mulberry plantations, probably of the white mulberry, which was used to feed silk worms. The production of silk and high-quality wool, in combination with professional weavers led to fine products. The reputation of the Swedish women as excellent artisans was widespread and their work could be sold at a good profit on the market.

In 1825, the four villages had 114 families with 603 inhabitants. There were seven windmills, 90 ploughs and 30 weaving looms. Rye and wheat were used for sowing seed. Turnips, millet and peas were grown. Apart from 125 deciduous trees, there were 647 fruit trees, comprising 23 apple, 21 pear, 46 plum, 104 cherry, as well as a grand total of 1,480 mulberry trees. In the 1830s, only 50 people in Gammalsvenskby had been born in the 18th century. The average age was low. But what prevailed from Hiiumaa, apart from the language, included home furnishings, garden layout, customs, festival traditions, tales and legends, proverbs and games. In 1845 and 1848, the inhabitants suffered from serious illnesses such as cholera, laryngitis, pneumonia and typhus.

The village was largely isolated from the Swedish-speaking people up to the mid-1850s. The first contact took place in 1835 with a Finno-Swedish pharmacist, who had served some time in Kherson. The next visitor to the village, however was by the Finno-Swedish linguist Johan Wilhelm Lagus in 1852. He was extremely interested in the village inhabitants and their means of living and made notes of his impressions and the information he received. Each household owned about 65 hectares of land. The summers were hot and dry. They cultivated wheat, barley, rye, maize, some beans and peas and hardly any potatoes. The islet of Storholmen in the River Dnipro provided good pastureland for cows, sheep, oxen and horses. They could also harvest reeds for roofing and firewood. Fishing was good and they caught pike, perch, bream and roach. Both land and sea birds were hunted, including geese, ducks and partridges. Lagus also described the buildings. The dwelling houses stood with their long sides facing the courtyards and gables outwards, facing the road. They were built of limestone, which was quarried down by the river bank. The buildings were low and roofed with reeds. The Crimean War of 1853-1854 broke out when Russia annexed the principalities of Moldavia and Valakia, that were under Turkish sovereignty. In 1854, France and Great Britain entered the war on the side of the Ottoman Empire, just like the Kingdom of Sardinia. Russia was forced to leave the annexed areas in 1856. The war meant that many soldiers were lodged in Gammalsvenskby. They brought sickness with them and a cholera epidemic broke out. Up to 1856, as many as 50 of the village inhabitants had died – almost a sixth of the village inhabitants.

After the Crimean War, Gammalsvenskby underwent a change in structure. Plots of land were redistributed and three wide main streets with narrow side streets were formed. The reason was both for fire protection and to create space for grain sacks after new cultivation. Taknesgårdsgatan became a 40-metre-wide street, lined on each side with newly planted Acacia trees. In 1941, the pavements were still lined with Acacia - (Robinia, *Robinia pseudoacacia*), a tree species which was said to be dominant. In 1856, there were 34 homesteads in the village, each 128 x 64 m (8,192 m²). At the riverside, the crofters' cottages were still scattered pell-mell. The lack of land steadily increased and in 1860 there were 92 crofter families. They found it difficult to make ends meet, and they were obliged to do boon work for the farmers. In 1871, a Russification campaign took place, the Guardian epoch came to an end and the

Russian colonists' state within the state was replaced by the 'Zemstvo' institution, rather similar to the Swedish municipality. Russian became the administrative language, and Beryslav became a province town. The former system, whereby the village was the overall owner of the privately worked land and farmers were hereditary users, was abolished and the farmers became private owners of their land. By means of legal proceedings, the Swedes then tried to get rid of the German neighbours, who they claimed had appropriated some of the land that had earlier been allocated to the Hiiumaan Swedes. The court, however, proclaimed that the Germans had established right to their land and thus, they had the right of full disposal.

In 1872, Gammalsvenskby comprised 40 farms each with 60 dessiatins and 17 smallholders each with 12 *dessiatins* of land. Shortly afterwards, a general parcelling of the farms began. Lack of land gradually became more acute. In 1874, the freeholders were obliged to provide recruits to the country's defence. The service time for compulsory military service was 16 years, six of which were in active service. The eldest son was exempted from military service, but nevertheless, both Germans and Swedes regarded this as a breach of promise granted in the terms in the colonisation contract. The Svenskbybor were forced to participate both in the Russian-Turkish War of 1876-77 and in the Russian Japanese War of 1904-05. Many young men, sometimes with families, made the decision to leave their home village.

In 1881, the village was visited by a linguist from Helsinki, Doc. Herman Albert Vendell. He described the inhabitants' large gardens with mulberries, walnuts, cherries, apricots and plums. Trees included acacia, poplar, elderflower, a few vines, hops, turnips, root vegetables such as zucchinis and cikoria, and flowers. There were 40 farms in the village. The houses were built of rendered limestone and furnished with tall roofs, just as in the Swedish communities in Hiiumaa, Estonia and Livland. The floor was made of stamped clay. There was a living room and 2-3 more rooms. Vendel mentioned that "A small herb with strong spicy aroma performs the same service as twigs on the floor in the Gotlandic cottages" (wild thyme or absinthe). In 1882, the population of the village had increased to 565 people. Then the lack of land was even more accentuated.

In 1883, the teacher Konstantin Reinhold Wahlbeck arrived in Gammalsvenskby and stayed for a couple of years. He recorded the harvest yield. Wheat, rye, barley, oats, lentils and millet were cultivated. The summers could be very hot, which led to poor harvests, such as potato growing, but on the other hand the islets in the River Dnipro often provided good access to pasture and fodder. When the heat was intensive, harvesting was preferably done in moonlight at night. Pomiculture is described as an important side-line. Mulberries, cherries, plums, pears, bergamots (apples), apricots, zucchinis, cucumbers, melons and grapes were cultivated.

It was not until 1883 that the communal German-Swedish Lutheran congregation in Gammalsvenskby became an independent parish. All Lutherans in the district, irrespective of nationality belonged to this parish. The priests of the parish were Swedish off and on, but most often the sexton had to read from the Book of Homilies (sermons) and the Bible in Swedish in his own church. Prior to the First World War, good relations could be established with the Swedish parish in St. Petersburg, and a number of Swedish children were offered the opportunity to enrol at the boarding school in the capital.



Unficht von Alt-Schwebenborf



View of Gammalsvenskby/ Zmiivka and the church, drawn by Wilhelm Iserts 1904.



The church in Gammalsvenskby/ Zmiivka photographed from the west around 1922.

The old wooden church was by then in very poor shape and too small. The need of a new church was great. With contributions from Russia, Finland, Sweden and North America, and through donations, including one from Prince Carl, they managed to amass as much as 20,000 roubles for the building of a new church. A duel with the Germans emerged, as they also planned to build a church on the border between Mühlhausendorf and Schlangendorf. A parish hall would also be built next to the church. The Swedes completed their church first; at midsummer 1885 the new church stood dedicated to John the Apostle. The church was surrounded by a stone wall. It had a tin roof with a golden dome, crowned with a golden cross. It seated 500 people, as well as a gallery for a further 100 people. The church interior was decorated with altar paintings, and there was a church organ, two chandeliers, etc. The German church was completed two years later.

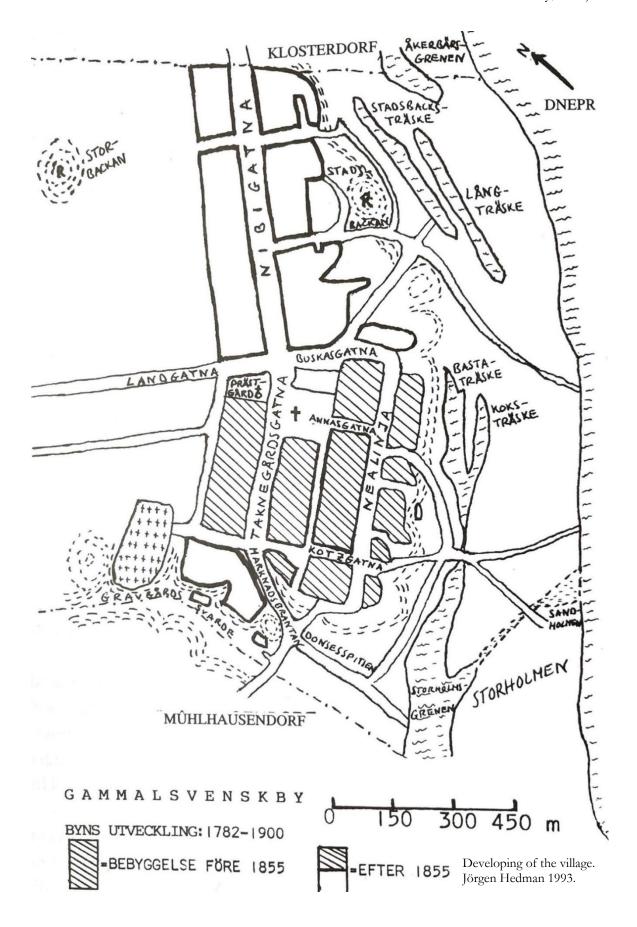
30 Years of Prosperity

Peace and prosperity prevailed for the next thirty years. The farmers had the means to build their own houses. The most affluent could purchase a tin or tiled roof. One cause of concern was the continued lack of land, as mentioned earlier. This led to several villagers emigrating, mainly to Canada, where it was still possible to acquire land free of charge in the 1890s, but some moved to Siberia. Altogether, some hundred Svenskbybor emigrated to Canada between 1886 and 1926.

Maize began to be cultivated on a large scale in 1890. New agricultural tools were introduced and in 1897, a multitude of orchards were established. The village plots of land were now completely embedded in these horticultural activities. Vineyards along Gravgårdsvarde in the south yielded c. 40,000 litres in a good year.

Victor Hugo Wickström from Östersund visited Gammalsvenskby in 1899. Then the village had 600 inhabitants, 110 of whom formed families and 70 were landowners. The prosperous families lived in large, spacious and light houses with whitewashed, rendered walls and painted wooden floors. The poorer people live in cramped, dark houses with stamped earth. A fire broke out in 1903 and caused great losses to the village. During the war between Russia and Japan in 1904-1905, 15 young men from the village were drafted to the front. The Japanese troops were unquestionably superior, and the war proved to be a disaster for Russia. Some of the blame was put on German officers, who were often of noble birth. This became the beginning of a largely widespread hatred of the Germans. A rebellion broke out in 1905-1906 between German colonists and the Russians. The Russians' xenophobia was mainly directed at the affluent German colonists, who were regarded as a tool for the conservative repressive regime.

Agricultural methods continued to develop in Gammalsvenskby, and a single-parcel land reform was implemented between 1908 and 1912. In 1906, the village had 735 inhabitants and in 1911, there were 105 landowners. The total number of completely landless farmworkers, however, increased, which led to economic and social gaps. This would lead to consequences in the future.





All the families were photographed outside their houses before the departure in 1929.



Mats Buskas well.



One of the old mills in the village.

The First World War and the Revolution of 1917

The First World War broke out in 1914. Russia's enemies were Austro-Hungary and Germany. A general mobilisation was instigated in autumn 1914. 130 men were recruited from Gammalsvenskby, either to fight against the Austrians or against the Turks. Russia's economy hit rock bottom in the war, and step by step they lost one battle after another against Germany and Austria on the West Front. The anti-German atmosphere in the country grew stronger.

In March 1917, Czar Nicholas II abdicated. His brother refused to take over, which led to the parliament's standing committee taking over the rule of the land under the leadership of the member of the committee Kerenskij. In October 1917, the small Bolshevik party seized power through a coup d'état, marking the outbreak of the revolution. A new government was formed with Vladimir Lenin as the chairman. Censorship was introduced and church property was confiscated. Most of the conscripts were granted home leave in late autumn that year and returned home; quite a number were attracted by the new socialistic tones. In spring 1918, The Landless Association' was formed in Gammalsvenskby, and some communist-minded youths formed 'The Red Tribunal', which was to work for land reforms in the village. They gained capital by stealing from and threatening Jews in Nova Beryslav, where many Jews had settled down. The Bolsheviks ravaged Gammalsvenskby on three occasions. Part of their programme was to redistribute land from large landowners to those with little land or the landless. Any criticism was met with reprisals. After a truce in 1917, Germany negotiated with the independent state that had been formed as Ukraine. They marched into Ukraine in 1918 and offered temporary protection from the Bolsheviks. The Germans left Ukraine in 1919, and during the following civil war, which broke out in the same year between the Whites and the Reds, Gammalsvenskby was plundered and some villagers were murdered, although the village in its entirety survived. The Red Army, however, took almost everything from the village, such as livestock, grain, etc.

1921 was a year of extreme drought and mass starvation. There was neither sowing seed nor cattle. In 1919, the village had had 610 horses and 580 cattle. One year later there were just 63 emaciated nags and some seventy scrawny cows. 80 villagers died of malnutrition. Several relief supplies were sent from Sweden, some from the Red Cross. The situation was also acute in 1922. Further relief supplies arrived from Sweden with provisions, agricultural machines, milk separators, clothes, cloth, a small library and equipment for a smaller village hospital.

Ukraine Annexed by the Soviet Union

In 1923, Ukraine was annexed by the Soviet Union. In the same year, an extensive land reform was implemented with distribution of land according to need, with the slogan "Factories for the workers and land for the farmers!". The affluent farmers, the Kulaks would be weeded out from the villages. Either they would be liquidated, or relegated to work camps in Siberia, or re-trained to be miners. In Ukraine, large noble estates would be converted into state-owned farms, 'sovkhozer'. The land would be re-parcelled according to family sizes. The landless would also be granted land. The farmers received their inherited right to work the land, but the state reserved the right of ownership.



Starving children during the severe famine 1922. Photo W. Sarwe. From "Bland Rysslands folk, Gammalsvenskby."



The roof was likely used as emergency fodder during the severe famine 2022.



The photograph was likely taken during the severe famine of 1922. The building in the background lacks a roof, which may have been used as emergency fodder.

In Gammalsvenskby, land could be acquired by those who moved out to the newly established daughter settlements in the steppe; to Nysvenskby or to Svensåker. 55 farmers applied to work the land at each location. However, only Nysvenskby, situated some 18 km west of Gammalsvenskby, managed to become a true village before 1929. The church and rectory were nationalised and religion was no longer allowed to be taught to youngsters under the age of 18.

In 1927, 136 Svenskbybor signed a petition directed to Sweden and Canada, where they begged for help in obtaining a joint emigration permit. This year saw harvest failure and in spring 1928 there was hardly any seed left for sowing. A new famine was imminent. Again, relief shipments arrived from Sweden, but this time, the crisis was not as serious as in 1921-1922. Nonetheless, the villagers' taxes had to be paid, which drained the village of livestock, which in lack of other assets could be dispensed with. Apart from taxation, the authorities also requisitioned grain, but this was confiscated, not paid for. Those who protested were regarded as counter-revolutionary. The notion of emigration grew in intensity. On 30th June 1928, a village council was held, when almost all of the 492 eligible voters voted for an application for an emigration permit.

Home to Sweden in 1929

In spring 1929, the Svenskbybor were granted permission to emigrate by the Soviet authorities and permission to immigrate by the Swedish government. This was only valid for Swedes domiciled in Gammalsvenskby. The American-funded Jewish association Agro-Joint, would redeem the farms in the village. On 23rd July 1929, everyone except two who changed their minds, left the village and joined two Russian river steamers for the first stage down to Kherson. On the following day, 885 people boarded the Turkish ship Firuzan. Early in the morning of 26th July, the ship Constanta docked in Rumania and from there the journey continued by train up through Europe. The group arrived in Trelleborg via the German Sassnitz on 1st August.

However, life in Sweden did not turn out as many Svenskbybor had envisaged. They were not allowed to live as a community and not run their own farms, but were give a couple of years' 'agricultural training' on Swedish estates. Many Svenskbybor regarded this as a token of mistrust against them, they who had been landowning farmers all their lives. Some also had to work as



The church in the village before the departur 1929.

contract labourers and felt that they were being exploited. The situation at some work places was often marked by a high degree of tension. In August 1929, an emigration to Canada was discussed. Some twenty Svenskbybor wished to move there.

Returnees to Gammalsvenskby

About a year later, 243 Svenskbybor decided to return to their home village, and in 1931 there were 260 permanent residents in 'Red Svenskby' as Gammalsvenskby was then called. Of the 243 people who returned in 1929-1931, only a few were convinced communists. The others returned for family reasons. Some fifteen Swedes, who had not joined the emigrants to Sweden, were left in the village; of these, three young men had served in the Red Army. The returnees could return to their homes when they arrived back at the village. Many of them moved into the houses that had belonged to the families who had remained in Sweden or moved to Canada. Some houses accommodated Jews or Germans. These had to move to other homes.

1929 marked the introduction of the collectivisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union. This meant a so-called dekulakisation, where affluent farmers with political influence were regarded as 'class enemies' and were expelled. To be classed as a 'kulak', it was sufficient to have employed farmhands or own more than two horses. Their property was expropriated. Affluent farmers with no political authority could remain, but were deprived of all owned property. Forced collectivisation and dekulakisation led to a recession in the country's subsistence. Knowledge of and willingness to take care of and run larger farms were non-existent. The harvest in 1931 was good, but a catastrophic failure in 1932-1933, which led to disastrous famine. Four million inhabitants died in Ukraine. In Gammalsvenskby, people managed quite well, although some deaths can be directly related to the starvation.

In 1930, the Communist International in Moscow sent about ten trained Swedish communists to the village to organise the agricultural collective 'The Swedish Communist Party' (Sjvedkompartija) in the village. The ecclesiastical buildings degenerated. The church was closed and the church service building was used as a so-called culture centre for party and collective meetings, dance halls or storehouses, sheds, etc. The tower was pulled down in 1933. It later became a storeroom for mineral fertilisers and eventually became a ruin.

The freelance journalist Alma Braathen visited Gammalsvenskby in 1932. She described an environment with low, whitewashed houses thatched with straw, surrounded by cultivated land with cotton, maize and sunroses. "At the outskirts of the town there was a mulberry grove. They extracted a smooth thread from the silkworms, which was knitted into their socks to make them more durable." There were large tobacco plantations, an infirmary and a well-stocked chemist's. At that time, they grew wheat, rye, barley and oats, and there were orchards with grapes, pears and apricots, etc. There were also plans to redirect operations to dairy livestock, something which never materialised. In the latter part of the 1930s, mainly cotton was grown, followed by autumn wheat, oats, barley, millet, sunrose, maize, potatoes, lucerne and silage. Water melons were also grown. There were about 1,200 hectares of crop fields, half of which were fallow every year.

Following the great famine in 1932-1933, dissatisfaction with the Soviet authorities increased. This led to persecution with purges and deportations. The political terror culminated in 1937-

1938. As an example, contacts with foreign countries were deemed as criminal acts. In the latter half of the 1930s, 22 Svenskbybor from Gammalsvenskby were abducted to be executed for anti-Soviet activities. The blame actually rested on some local villagers, including Swedes, who turned informers. This created a reign of terror with great fear and distrust in the villages. Nobody relied on anybody. At this time, the teaching of the Swedish language was also prohibited in the village, and the school was closed. The children were not allowed to speak 'Old Swedish' – the Estonian Swedish dialect – in their breaks. Collectivisation and purges totally shattered the farming fellowship.

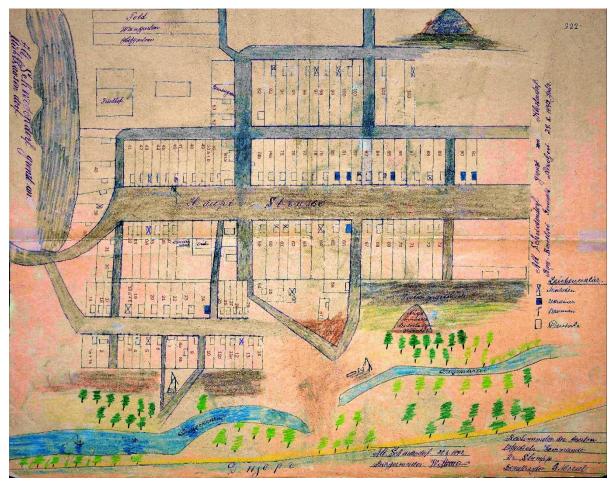


The church in Gammalsvenskby in the 1930s, after the tower had been demolished and the crosses on the church walls had been chipped away.

The Second World War

Germany initiated Operation Barbarossa, a war of aggression against the Soviet Union in 1941. At first it was successful. The Germans, having captured the part of Ukraine that incorporated Gammalsvenskby, then compiled a record of the village in 1941. There were 500 inhabitants, 265 of whom were Swedes, 68 Ukrainian and the rest Germans. The houses were in poor condition and the gardens neglected. Many of the horses, cows, sheep and pigs were taken away when the war broke out. Vegetables and tobacco were still cultivated. The pavements were lined with acacia trees. In Gammalsvenskby, the younger relatives of those villagers, who had been abducted in the 1930s, collected material to be used as indictments against those responsible. These were held accountable in 1942 and executed after brief trials.

The German armed forces' interest and wish to shoulder responsibility for Beryslav and Gammalsvenskby rested on the fact that there were many Germans there, and that Swedes, like Germans came to be classified as 'Volksdeutsche' (German-folk). The Volksdeutsche were part of plans for the integration of expatriate Germans in the national socialistic Germany. Gammalsvenskby was placed under the civil administration and was part of 'The Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories' (380,000 km², 30 million inhabitants). The farmer collective was preserved in order to provide for the war machine. Several of the young men in the village were recruited and forced into service in the Wehrmacht, the German defence forces, as interpreters, coachmen and chauffeurs.



A map of Gammalsvenskby, drawn on August 29, 1942, during the German occupation. G. Wessel.

On 24th October 1943, when the war took a new course, the German authorities also evacuated the Svenskbybor. They were to be relocated to Krotoschyn in Poland, which the Germans wished to colonise with Germans. They had to go there on foot and with carts. Half of the villagers were transported by train to Offenburg in Baden in Western Germany. In 1943-1944, the village was in the hands of the Red Army, who then occupied Kherson, Mykolaiv and Odessa in spring 1944. In the concluding phase of the war in 1945, some fifty Svenskbybor managed to go to Sweden at various intervals. In compliance with the Yalta Agreement between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, Soviet citizens detected in German or German occupied districts would be sent back to the Soviet Union. At the end of the war in 1945, 150 Svenskbybor ended up in the Russian occupied zone and were sent back to the Soviet Union. 50 villagers were also handed over by France.

Most of the Svenskbybor, like the Soviet Germans, were sent to the forced labour camps in Vorkuta Komi, west of the Urals beside Barents Sea. Several died on the way and in the camp due to malnutrition. Eventually, many Svenskbybor managed to gain permission to leave the labour camp and return to their home village. Some of them returned to Gammalsvenskby in 1947, but many remained longer. In the wake of the war, famine broke out in 1947-1948, but conditions gradually improved during the ensuing years.

The Post War Period

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union initiated an extensive rebuilding of the country. By creating large-scale state-owned farms, sovkhozy, and massive infrastructural projects, the government aimed at forming the socialist state. Projects like waterworks, canal systems and newly created agricultural areas were swiftly and often brutally implemented. In Ukraine, this led to a change in the landscape and entire communities were reformed. Many were severely affected by this development. People from different parts of the union were forced to leave their homes and move to new districts. Their language, culture and religion were oppressed. Minorities lost the right to practise their faith, teach in their mother tongue or preserve their traditions. This policy was also palpable in Zmijivka.



Horse-drawn wagon. In the background, the newly built, impressive hospital. Now demolished. Around 1955.

After the war, Gammalsvenskby (Starosjvedske) was renamed Verbivka and the former German villages were also renamed: Schlangendorf became Zmejovka, Mühlhausendorf became

Michajlovka and Klosterdorf became Kostirka. Eventually, these villages amalgamated and formed a single entity, today's Zmijivka.

In 1951, the Soviet Union and Poland signed an agreement of exchange of land. In the west, three borderlands to Poland were relinquished and in return, c. 2,500 people from the Drohobych region were forcibly relocated to Southern Ukraine. A large group of these Boykos, mainly from Lodyna, an Estonian group from the Carpathian Mountains, ended up in Zmijivka, where several new streets and houses were built to accommodate the new arrivals. The relocated Boykos were faced with great cultural and social challenges. They belonged to the Greek-Catholic faith, which had been subjected to harsh oppression in the Communist Era. Despite this, they clung to their identity as Boykos, and the families preserved their language, songs, Christmas traditions and other cultural expressions. Following Ukraine's independence, they were able to revert to their faith. And there is a music group who play traditional Western Ukrainian folk music in Zmjiivka.

During the Soviet Era, two sovkhoses were established in Zmjiivka. The first one, Kolos, was established between 1946 and 1947. They focused on agriculture, with crop cultivation and livestock farming. The other one, in Michurinets, was established between 1958 and 1960 and engaged villagers in horticulture, orchard farming and viticulture.

In line with the Soviet Union's aim to form a country of the future, the Nova Kachovska dam was built in 1950-1956 after damming the River Dnipro. It resulted in an enormous water reservoir, 230 km long and 25 km wide. The project led to increased access to drinking water, improved conditions for seafaring in the River Dnipro and enabled the building of extensive irrigation systems in the arid southern regions in Ukraine. A large hydro-electric power station was completed in 1956, which meant that Zmijivka was also supplied with a water system providing drinking water to every household. No sewage system was built, however, so outdoor privies continued to be used.

But this development was at a price. The water level in the district rose 18 metres, which meant that parts of Gammalsvenskby ended up underwater. Certain streets disappeared, but Naberježna (Nibigatne) and Dniprovska, originally built by Swedish and German colonists, survived. In connection with the rise in water level, trees and bushes were planted in the ravines and in the areas surrounding the village, especially between 1952 and 1960, as part of a replanting project after the floods.

During the Second World War, many of the houses had been damaged or destroyed. After the war, they were rebuilt by the inhabitants of Zmijivka. They preserved their characteristic, elderly building style with houses built of stone, and the original plot division was retained. Despite harsh oppression and adverse living conditions, the villagers maintained their dreams of liberty. In 1953, almost all of the Swedish villagers applied to emigrate, but this was denied. In 1964, there were only 164 people left in the original Gammalsvenskby. In 1965-1966, several families were granted an emigration permit. It was not until 1988, during the glasnost and perestrojka period, that the first group from Sweden were able to visit their ancestral village in Ukraine.

The Period Following Ukraine's Independence in 1991

When Ukraine and Gammalsvenskby gained independence in 1991, the village gradually rose from the ashes. After many years of persecution and attempts at suppressing their identity during the Soviet Era, the village and its diversity among the inhabitants had preserved their respective cultural heritages and their forefathers' traditions. Everyone was proud of their different backgrounds, but together they were now Ukrainians.

The two sovkhoses were converted into kolchoses with a collective co-ownership of the formerly employed villagers. The system, however, did not work well and it was abandoned between 1999 and 2003. As reimbursement for unpaid wages, the former workers demolished the buildings and reused the material for their own means. Since then, most of them have made their living on farming. It has mainly been small-scale production, where potatoes and carrots have been the most important crops. Gammalsvenskby was particularly renowned for its good potatoes. After 2010, the farmers received better payment for their potatoes, and several were able to buy small tractors and irrigation systems for developing production.



Potato harvest 2021.



Remains of the old sovkhoz. 2016.



Carrot harvest at the Steppe. 2016.



Kitchen gardens overlooking the Dnipro. 2014.



Thanksgiving service for the year's harvest. 2021

The Swedish church was a mere ruin in 1989. Then, the local Ukrainian Orthodox parish, under the leadership of the priest Olexandr Kvitkas initiated the rebuilding of the church. It regained its church tower and an onion-shaped dome was added. The church was consecrated in 1989 and dedicated to the Archangel Michael. In 1992, a Swedish-Lutheran congregation was also formed and an agreement on a joint usufructuary right was reached. Olexandr Kvitka worked in close cooperation with the Swedish parish and had not only put the church at the disposition of visiting Swedish priests, but also loaned liturgical vestments and arranged communal funerals. For the first time in 62 years, in 1991, a Swedish mass was celebrated in the church by the priest Kjell Knutas and the curate Henning Herman, both Svenskby descendants. The orthodox church celebrated their masses in line with the old Byzantine ritual. Today, Ivan Kvitka, grandson of Olexandr, is the parish priest.



Women working on the restoration of the church in Gammalsvenskby/ Zmijivka in 1989



The church in Gammalsvenskby 1991.

The German Evangelist-Lutheran parish was also registered in 1993 and the church was renovated. A new vicarage was built next to the church and the German priest Ulrich Zenker took up residence there. He developed the parish and initiated a cultivation project. He was very popular, but moved back to Germany after some years, just like his successor. Since 2010, services have been held by priests form the nearest large city, Kryvyi Rih, although they are also held by lay priests, in German, Swedish and Ukrainian. The parish is active and runs many activities for children and youths. It is led today by the chairperson Nina Knutas. The Roman Catholic parish was reformed in 1993. In 1998, a chapel was built in Kostyrka, which reconnects with the Catholic faith which existed there through the Boykos. In 2017, a new, blue and beautiful church was consecrated and dedicated to 'The Birth of the Most Holy Mother of God'. The parish is very active and promotes strong group spirit, very much thanks to experiences of former oppression.

Over the past few years, the Baptist chapel has been built beside the tumulus Storbacka. Its function is a prayer house and place for Bible studies for a small congregation.



The Roman Catholic church in Kostyrka.

The retirement home in Gammalsvenskby was established in 2002 and was somewhat unusual in Ukraine. The elderly were normally cared for by their families and remained in their own home, often along with children or relatives. This retirement home in the village was thus a unique initiative. There were 35 places for the elderly, and the home was highly appreciated. Many were happy there and felt as it they were at home. The atmosphere was warm, with good nursing care and healthcare in residence and friendly staff. The warden Natalya Zabluda, who was a doctor, initiated and led the operation. She had a close relationship with Sweden and participated in several study visits there. The Swedish influence can be noted in the way the home is run. When war broke out in 2022, the elderly were evacuated to safer premises.

Since 1991, many Swedish organisations and private people had helped in various ways to make improvements in the village. Several public facilities, such as the school, the home for the elderly,

the nurseries and health clinics have received aid by way of renovations, new windows, doors, floors, as well as equipment such as washing machines, cookers and boilers. The association 'Föreningen Svenskbyborna' has also, apart from renovations, also supported the most vulnerable villagers with medicine and sick care. Since the mid-90s, Sven Bjerlestam, a Swede domiciled in Ukraine, has arranged emergency relief on-site between the village and Sweden. In the mid-90s, Christina Sturén started to teach Swedish in the village to those who were interested. Later, Larysa Belei succeeded her and since 2011, the association 'Föreningen Svenskbyborna' has shouldered the responsibility of ensuring that the teaching of Swedish continues. This has meant that besides those who spoke Old Swedish or Swedish since childhood, several others have learnt or maintained their knowledge of Swedish.

The location of Zmijivka has always been isolated, since the village is situated on a headland in the River Dnipro, surrounded by two ravines. This may be the reason why the village has retained much of its hallmark. But it has also been impractical, since it has been necessary to drive via the municipal city of Beryslav along an inferior road by the river to reach the village, which was time-consuming. But that all changed in 2008.

A state visit took place that year with the Swedish King and Queen. The initiator was Lolo Sturén who also organised the visit. In this connection, the village underwent a major refurbishment. A new playground was built at the nursery and several of the roads in the village were asphalted. The Swedish church was renovated and the tower was re-roofed. A water closet was built next to the church. The entire village was involved in cleaning and tidying the flower beds and roadsides. A new road leading directly down to the village was also laid out and given the name Konungsvägen. It has been highly appreciated by Gammalsvenskbyn's farmers, who could more easily transport their products to markets. The owners of the Swedish-owned ketchup-factory, Chumak, Carl Sturén and Johan Bodén put much effort into the operation and contributed with many resources and funds for the refurbishment.

Today's Zmijivka, until 2022, was an oasis in the middle of the steppe. A strong, beautiful and friendly village, which had undergone a long period of adaptation and acceptance of differences. In 2022, about 2,300 people from different backgrounds lived in the village, often described as 'Little Europe'.

The Russian Invasion

As early as in 2014, in connection with the Russian annexation of Crimea, anxiety was expressed by the village inhabitants that the dam construction at Nova Kachovka, which was situated 25 km downstream, would be appropriated. The annexation, however, was confined to Crimea.

On 24th February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion attempt of Ukraine was initiated, the dam was captured by Russian forces. Gammalsvenskby (Zmijivka) was occupied by Russia for eight months, from 25th March until 11th November 2022. During the occupation, the village mayor was imprisoned and tortured. Many inhabitants, particularly women and children, were obliged to flee. On 1st September 2022, a Russian illegitimate 'election' was held, when armed guards with automatic weapons accompanied the election officials from house to house. Most villagers refused to participate; many barricaded themselves in their homes and let their dogs out – their barking expressed their resistance. Despite this, it was reported that 89% of the villagers

had voted in favour of becoming part of Russia. Before the Russian forces retreated to the other side of the river, they destroyed the village's electricity supply, plundered their homes and mined the roads and riverside.

After the liberation, intensive artillery shelling towards the village began. In February 2023, a young couple were killed in their bedroom by a tank shell fired from the other side of the river. This was followed by a new wave of evacuation. In May, the first aerial bomb with an explosive force of between 500 and 1,500 kilos fell; it destroyed many of the public buildings, such as the school, culture centre and town hall. In the summer, incendiaries where used, which caused extensive fires in the dwelling areas. Altogether, about twenty civilians have been killed in the village. No military targets have been found.

In summer 2024, the German church was destroyed by German loitering munition. Two weeks later, the Swedish/Ukrainian Orthodox church was hit and burnt to the ground. Today, all public buildings and most private houses are totally destroyed. It was reported in autumn 2024 that the Russian army on the other side of the river engaged in so-called 'human safaris', where civil targets were identified and attacked with drone-borne grenades. Among the victims was a 50-year-old woman, killed while she was feeding her cow, and an 83-year-old man who was fetching water for his neighbours. In spring 2025, anti-personnel mines were spread out along the village streets by ranged weapons. The mines rarely lead to immediate death but cause severe mutilations. Several villagers have been seriously injured by such mines.

In August 2025 only five people remained in the village, individuals who, for various reasons cannot or will not leave. They live in the shelter of their root cellars. The village today is heavily mined, and each attempt to engage humanitarian aid is thwarted by Russian drones or artillery. The majority of the village's earliest inhabitants are now internally displaced persons within Ukraine, domiciled in the immediate area or in other parts of the country. Some have been forced to flee beyond the Ukrainian borders.



The park called "Gravgårdsvarde" in Swedish. 2012.



Gammalsvenskby has been severely affected by Russia's terror bombings. Photo: The Svenskbyborna Association, 2023.



Destroyed residential house. Photo: The Svenskbyborna Association.

Description of the Cultural Environment

After the Crimean War, the village has largely retained the plan drawn up in the 1850s. Taknegårdsgatan and Nealinja have been widened and every alternate farm moved from its plot. This provided larger plots and three boulevard-like streets, crossed by side streets. The objective was both fire safety and to create space for grain stacks following land reclamation. Taknegårdsgatan was 40 metres wide and lined with acacia trees. The impoundment of water in the Kachovka dam led to a rise in water level in the River Dnipro. The riverbanks and parts of the built-up areas were submerged under water and one of the main streets disappeared. Otherwise, the historic plan with two main roads and side roads has largely been preserved, although the plots of land have diminished in size.

The village buildings have been recorded on several occasions. In 1852, the homes were described as low houses of limestone with their long sides facing the courtyards and the gables facing the road. The limestone was quarried down by the river, where there was also a limestone kiln. The roofs were thatched with reeds. An 1883 record notes gardens with walnuts, mulberries, cherries, plums, pears, bergamots (apples), apricots, pumpkins, cucumbers, melons and grapes. The houses were rendered. In the 1890s, the affluent had large, spacious houses, light and whitewashed, with painted wooden floors.

Before the Swedes left the village in 1929, a number of unique photos were taken, showing most of the families in front of their houses. The houses resemble earlier descriptions, and it is easy to determine the families' economic status. The richest farmers had tiled roofs, while the middle classes had tin roofs and the poorest had reed-thatched roofs. Details, such as wicker fences and walls are also discernible.

A record from 1932 describes an area with low, whitewashed houses with reed-thatched roofs, surrounded by cultivated fields with cotton, maize and sunroses. On the outskirts there was a grove with mulberry trees, and the orchards produced grapes, pears and apricots. In the Second World War, the villagers were forcibly evacuated to Germany. Buildings and gardens degenerated and the village was badly damaged. After the war, about half of the buildings were still in ruins, and those who returned had to begin by improvising and living in hastily renovated houses thatched with reeds.

During the Soviet Union Era, between the 1950s and the 1970s, Zmijivka underwent extensive restructure. Several public buildings were raised: a school, culture centre, town hall and nursery, in the standardised and rational style of the time. The buildings were mainly constructed of concrete blocks or concrete bricks, with an architecture which emphasised practicality, simplicity and a massive scale. The facades were rendered or covered in white or grey and often bore artistic features with ideological messages. A typical feature was public ornamentation with political content: reliefs, mosaics or murals with themes such as collective work, revolution, peace or technical advances. Cement was the predominant material. Large pieces of cast concrete were used, especially for public buildings. Concrete brick was also used and eventually moulded components were produced for walling.



View over Gammalsvenskby. Photo taken from the church tower looking out toward the steppe in Taknegårda. Closest is Taknegårdsgata, planted with an avenue, most likely acacia trees. From the 1920s.



View of Taknegårda. In the foreground is the parish house and the priest's residence. It was built during the war year of 1914. In front of the building, there is a landscaped garden with a large roundabout and cultivation plots. Closest to the viewer is the wooden fence that surrounded the church, with posts topped by small crosses. To the right, the main street is partially visible.

Photos from Gammalsvenskby from the late 1920s showing buildings with various designs, roofing materials, and different types of fences.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. The roof is thatched with reeds. The windows have heavily profiled lintels and shutters.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. Gable made of wood. The roof is covered with thatch. The plot is enclosed by a woven fence.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. Roof covered with tiles. Gable made of unplastered limestone.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. The roof is covered with tiles. The windows are pointed-arched with profiled casings. A couple of locust trees (Robinia pseudoacacia) grow on the plot.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. The gable is made of unplastered limestone. The roof is covered with metal sheets. The plot is enclosed by a woven fence.



Building constructed of limestone with plastered walls. The roof is covered with clay tiles. The gable is made of wood. In front of the house stands a well with a Rococo-inspired design. A locust tree grows beside the house.

Gammalsvenskby's buildings 1991-2022

large, traditional root cellar as a supplement to the fridge.

Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, development was largely halted due to a weak economy in the 1990s. Renovations were only carried out on churches, with capital from Ukrainian and foreign parishes. Gradually, a few dwelling houses and outbuildings were added. Later, existing houses were renovated. Eventually, paint returned to the houses, fences and gates. The village was a linear or ribbon settlement and has retained its character with broad main streets with narrow, equally-distributed side streets. The plot of each household is placed between the rows of houses. The location of the village beside the River Dnipro and the surrounding croplands reinforce their character of an agricultural village with close connections to the river and landscape.

Today, the centre is the crossroads where two shops, two taverns and a chemist are situated, and where a market is held every Wednesday. This has become the natural meeting place for the village. Most inhabitants make their living from small-scale farming or hold one of the public municipal positions, such as teachers or in administration. Many of the younger generation are engaged in sport, mainly football. A spare time hobby is fishing.

Most households have a winter home and a summer home. Inside the gate, the path is often lined with a pergola covered with vines. Every home has an outdoor privy and an outdoor shower, since there is no sewage system. Some have acquired a water closet. Many households have small barns with hens, geese, rabbits and goats, and some even have space for a cow or two and a pig. Almost every family has one or two watchdogs, which are kept in kennels. Every household has a

Many of the houses have retained their original appearance with white-rendered facades and brightly-coloured, most often blue gables, house corners and heavily-profiled window casing. The gables often have cover boarding and are often decorated with sunrays or rombs, which emanate from the timber tradition. The idiom is historically and traditionally orientated with roots in 19th century Russia/Ukraine, particularly in details and colouration, with inspiration from timber architecture and iron-forging tradition. The architecture was characterised by great stylistic variation, influenced by Western European trends and traditional shapes, including inspiration from medieval Russian timber and brick architecture in cities such as Novgorod and Suzdal. Typical features were richly ornamented facades, wood embellishments and highly colourful surfaces.

Blue or turquoise were the dominating colours both before 1929 and during the Soviet Era. In folklore in Ukraine, Russia and Caucasus, blue was thought to be a protector from evil spirits and accidents. The colour also has a religious meaning and is associated with heaven, eternity and the Virgin Mary within the orthodox tradition. Oskar Utas, who left the village as a child in 1929, recalls that there was a lot of blue around windows and on doors. Blue was used aesthetically to create a contrast with the white plaster and accentuates the building details, creates an elegant impression, resembles precious stone and is visible in snow. During the Soviet Era, the range of colour was limited and blue pigment (cobolt or ultramarine blue) was produced in large quantities, which meant that blue was common. The combination of availability, folkloric symbolism and the need to brighten up daily life contributed to the frequency of blue. After 1991, green and sometimes red became more common.

The walls of the dwelling houses are often white-rendered and most houses are mainly single-storeyed. The material is often concrete brick, common brick is rare. Masonry, often quarried in Crimea, is also common. Houses with walls of cast cement, where large moulded blocks are used for walls, blocks often deriving from demolished public buildings. The gables are mainly of wood, sometimes of concrete brick and more rarely of red brick. The roofs are normally of corrugated asbestos cement sheets, corrugated galvanised iron and on occasions smaller roof tiles. The chimneys are of concrete brick and often rendered brick. Doors are often sky-blue, sometimes turquoise or green.



Two buildings constructed of precast concrete elements. The left one has a gable made of brick and concrete brick, while the right one features a blue-painted wooden gable. The window casings are painted in a strong blue colour. The right building has house corners with blue-painted ornaments, including a romb. In front of the buildings, there is a fence with white-painted cast concrete elements between blue-painted posts. The metal gate is also painted blue.



White-plastered building with a wooden gable and a roof of profiled metal sheets. The yard is enclosed by a wooden fence on a base with plastered posts. Photo from 2016.



White-plastered building with a blue-painted gable topped by a sun. The yard is enclosed by a fence on a base with brick pillars. A blue-painted metal gate features romb motifs. The road in front of the house is unpaved but has concrete curbstones.



Entirely blue-painted building. House corners made of concrete brick. Wooden gable with ornaments in the shape of sunrays. A wide wall moulding below the gable features ornaments in the form of a sun and rombs.



Blue-painted gable with wooden ornaments in the form of a sun and a wooden finial.



Green-painted colour scheme on the gable, veranda, wooden fence, and metal gate. Ornaments in the form of rombs on both the gable and the fence.



Entirely green-painted building. Walls likely constructed of precast concrete elements. Green window casings and a wooden gable with ornaments in the form of a romb.

The traditional fences are of wood placed on a concrete base with posts of concrete brick, often rendered and crowned with a pyramidal lintel. During the Soviet Era, they were often replaced by rough, cast concrete elements with a classic design, sometimes with Baroque and Rococo elements. The components were combined and mirrored to create different patterns. In more recent years, new moulded concrete elements and sheet metal have become more common, probably for practical and safety reasons.

The gates are often of sheet metal, painted blue, turquoise or green. They are normally up to two metres high with the top part of ornate wrought iron. Typical features include wrought iron ornaments on sheet metal gates, shaped as rombs, scrolls, pretzels or other classically inspired patterns and richness of colour. These have replaced the former wooden gates, which often bore rombic decoration. The decoration may be painted in orange, yellow, red or pink. The metal gates were most likely produced during the Soviet era and manufactured on a large scale. The romb motif can be traced back a long way, including to the Byzantine Empire.



Fence of cast concrete. Blue-painted sheet metal gate with wrought iron ornaments shaped as rombs, here with a green background and pink infill. The gate and the lintel feature white-painted wrought iron ornaments.



Classic wooden fence with bases and posts of rendered concrete brick. Red-painted sheet metal gate with wrought iron ornaments similar to the blue gate above, and a lintel with red-painted wrought iron ornaments.



Blue-painted sheet metal gate with wrought iron ornaments shaped as rombs, here painted yellow. The gate and lintel feature white-painted wrought iron ornaments.



Colourful green-painted gate with wrought iron ornaments similar to the blue and red gates above. Lintel with pink and white-painted wrought iron ornaments.



Classic wooden fence with plastered base and posts. Turquoise-painted gate with wrought iron ornaments in the shape of grape clusters. Lintel with white-painted wrought iron ornaments.



Newly painted green metal gate with highlighted rombs and edges in red.



Red sheet metal gate with ornate wrought iron lintel. Flanked by brick posts. A pergola leads into the yard, which is enclosed by a concrete fence. Photo 2013

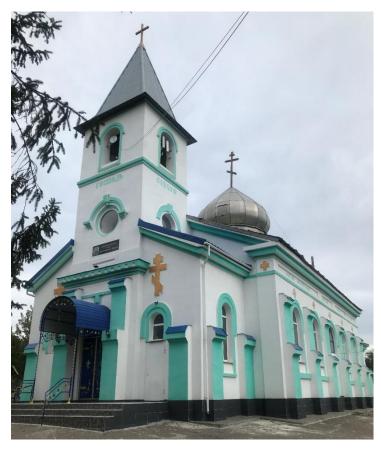


Decorative painting on garage, 2013.

Public Buildings

The most important public buildings and environments are clear bearers of identity. The Swedish/Ukrainian orthodox church is a rendered stone church with a tin roof. When the church was rebuilt in the early 20th century, the original tower was added, as well as a new onion-shaped dome. The interior was decorated in the orthodox style and in 2021, the exterior was also endowed with a more orthodox appearance with turquoise colouration of the quoins and other building details. The onion-shaped dome was to be replaced by a new, blue-goldish dome in 2022, and was ready to be installed below.

The German church was white-rendered with a red tin roof and a freshly renovated interior in classical white with ornamental details. It was framed by tall poplars. The churchyards often had concrete gravestones, but there are a few of diabase. Memorial photos are common on the gravestones, and the graves are often surrounded with concrete frames painted blue. The culture centre in Zmijivka has been built of concrete brick and has a façade with a large mosaic, a classical example of the artistic propaganda which lent prestige to the public buildings and reinforced the Soviet identity. The school was built of concrete brick in two stages, inaugurated in 1955 and extended in 1984 in a classic Soviet style. Beside the school there is a sports ground with football pitches and a basket court.





The Church of Sweden in Gammalsvenskby, 2021. A new dome for the church was completed in 2021, but it was never installed before the Russian invasion



Grave maintenance. The graves are surrounded by blue concrete frames.



The German church. Completely destroyed by Russian drones in June 2024.



The post office. Here, the Swedish and Ukrainian flags hang side by side. 2016.



The cultural centre with its mosaic. In the foreground, a World War II monument. 2011.



The culturale center 2013.



The retiring home was built in 1956. 2016



The grocery store in the village center, 2021.



The interior of the grocery store, 2014.



The entrance to the new section of the school's extension from 1984. 2021.



The svenskbybor's museum 2023. Former pub of the kolkhoz. Purchased by the Föreningen Svenskbyborna and renovated to become a museum in 2022. Here with director, Valentyna Herman. 2023.

Cultivations, Gardens and Green Areas

Gardens were important for the households' subsistence and had traditionally been cultivated with potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, sweet peppars, cabbage, maize, cucumber and watermelon. Fruit trees, such as apple, pear, plum, apricot, walnut and grapes, were a common occurrence, and paths were framed by grapes in pergolas. The garden often had a walnut tree and ornamental plants, such as roses and flowering bushes in small flowerbeds alongside the street, which created a verdant and vibrant village environment.

Public plantations were few, but a large number of roses were planted in front of the culture centre in connection with the village's 240th anniversary, and in 2022, roses were planted beside the Marian statue at the entrance to the village.

The most important green areas are the ravines. Gravgårdsvarde in Gammalsvenskby, a drained ravine south of the Swedish church, was planted with willows when the Kachovka dam was built and the water level raised. The location is very beautiful, a park-like area next to the river, and it has become an important place for meetings and social gatherings. In 1951, Gammalsvenskby was renamed Verbika in Ukrainian, which means 'Willow Tree Village'. The traditional market place is situated just north of the park, and in recent years, it has been used for public festivals, particularly in connection with visits. Another important natural environment is the water-filled ravine just north of the village, where trees were planted when the water level of the river was raised. It was an idyllic location with a bathing jetty and a beautiful water mirror surrounded by a deciduous forest. This location was popular for picnics and gatherings, such as Easter celebrations.

Despite changes in history, the village has retained a good deal of its traditional character from pre-1929, particularly through the small, whitewashed houses with brightly coloured, often blue details along the River Dnipro. The churches are landmarks and of great significance to the local pride. Another central part of the village identity is the diversity; there, people with different backgrounds live side by side. Today, they are united by a mutual pride in being Ukrainians, whilst they simultaneously cherish their respective cultural heritages.



Zmijivka photographed from the south. 2021.



Storbacka with remains of a Turkish fortification, 2012.



The riverbank at the Dnipro, 2011. The erosion is a result of the damming of the Kakhovka Dam.



The ravine, "Gravgårdsvarde", south of Gammalsvenskby.



Gravgårdsvarde 2013.





On the left, the Acacia Avenue and the Wednesday market in the village center, in the background 2016. On the right, a tractor at Nibigatne.





Typical pergola, here in Lilja Malma's garden, 2015.



Flowerbed at the school, 2021.



'Storytelling bench' and flowers, 2016.

Public Buildings and Monuments

Public Buildings	Year of Construction	Status
Swedish Lutheran Church/ Ukrainian Orthodox Church	1885	Burnt out
German Evangelist-Lutheran Church	1887	Burnt out
Greek-Catholic Church	2000–2017	Damaged
Town Hall	1960	Obliterated
Culture centre with cinema/theatre	1970–1975	Obliterated
Culture centre with library and Sovkhos museum	1970–1975	Obliterated
School	1955 + 1984	Destroyed. Basement remains
Pre-school Verbika	C. 955	Burnt out
Health centre/dentist surgery	1956	Obliterated
Home for the elderly	1956	Obliterated
Post office	1965	Obliterated
Chemist's		Obliterated
8 shops		Obliterated
3 pubs		Obliterated
Svenskby museum. Initiated. Former pub.	1960 Renovated 2021	Burnt out
Swedish open-air museum. Initiated.	1800s	
Public Places		
Central square, market place		Bomb damaged
Sports ground at the school	1955	Bomb damaged
Gravgårdsvarde, park with a beach	Created 1952–1960	Drained
Norra ravinen, bathing place with forest	Created 1952–1960	Drained
Monument		
Ukraine's freedom monument	1991	Shattered 2022
Grave of the unknown soldier, Verbika	Soviet Era	
World War II, Verbika		

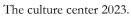
Millenium statue	2000	
Our Lady the Protector with roses	2021–2022	Bomb damaged
Dwelling houses (796)		
Naberježna (Nibigatne)	1782–1800	
Dniprovska-street	1804–1830	
M. Bulata-street	1920–1925	
Stepova-street	1950–1953	
Urožajna-street	1950–1953	
Herojiv Ukrajiny-street	1950–1955	
Robotja-street	1953–1955	
Sjevtjenka-street	1959–1954	
Skiljna-street	1960	
Molodizjna-street	1970	
Starosvedska-street	1973–1975	
Ljuteranska-street	1975	
Nova-street	1975–1985	





The town hall, 2013 and 2023. It was completely destroyed by bombing in 2023. Photos: Föreningen Svenskbyborna.







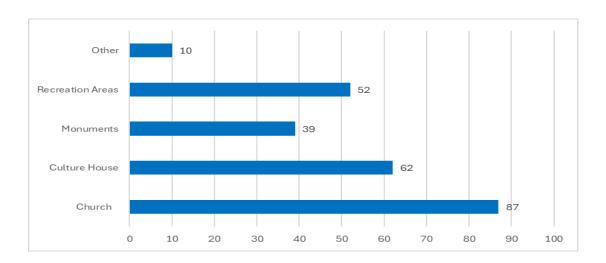
The health centre 2023.

What are the Prerequisites for the Villagers to Return? Survey

In order to solicit information on the citizens' own thoughts and ideas since the war broke out, we engaged the help of Beryslav Municipality to carry out a survey among the internally displaced people from Gammalsvenskby. 98 people responded to the survey. In our investigation, we presumed that Ukraine had won the war and Russia had left Kherson Oblast.

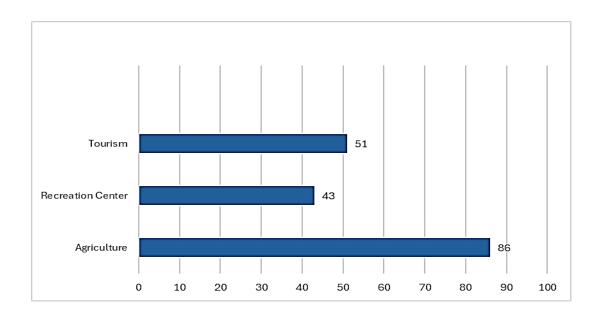
Which cultural buildings are important for you?

Churches 87%
Culture centre 62%
Recreation areas 52%
Monuments 39%
Other 10%



What possible facilities or activities do you envisage?

Agriculture 86% Tourism 51% Recreation centres 43%



Which activities are important for you?

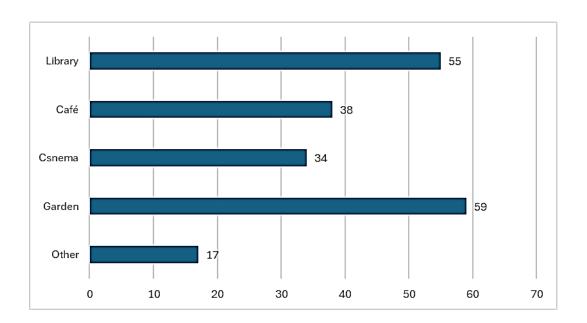
Cultivation/garden 59%

Library 55%

Café 38%

Cinema 34%

Other 17%



Which infrastructure is important for you?

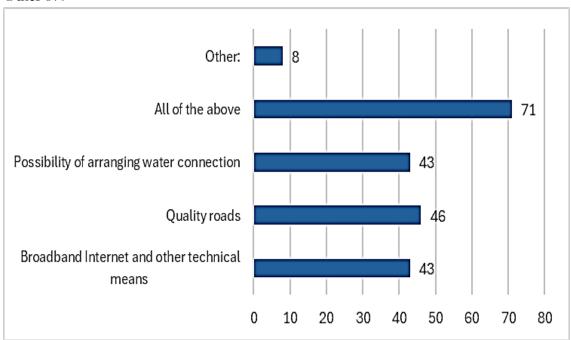
All the above mentioned 71%

Road condition 46%

Broadband and other technology 43%

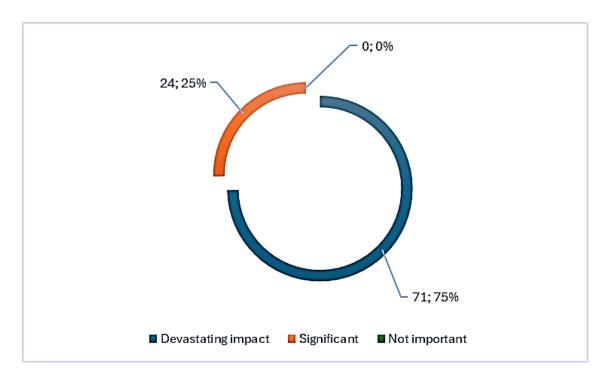
Water supply 43%

Other 8%



How would you assess the impact of the lack of water due to the collapse of the Kachovka dam?

Disastrous impact 72% Significant impact 24% Not important 0%



What would increase interest in the village? It has a unique Swedish history, but what else might attract both returnees and new visitors? Compilation of free text.

Over and above the unique Swedish history of the village, many factors are raised as important to win back both former and new villagers. The most frequent point was employment, the need of work opportunities is paramount. Suggestions were made as to how to create new work opportunities, for example by establishing an agricultural processing company, as a local equivalent to the ketchup factory Chuman in Kachovka, established by Swedes, or by setting up farms, commercial greenhouses or other small-scale production.

The reconstruction of the infrastructure was another key issue. There is a need of homes, electricity, water, schools, pre-schools, hospitals, shops, churches and cultural meeting places. Many point out that without the vital societal functions, life cannot return to the village. Security is also crucial, the village must be cleared of mines and explosive remnants after the war.

Tourism also offers opportunities, both based on culture and nature. Suggestions included reinstating historic monuments, offering guided tours, opening hostels, mini hotels and campsites. The beautiful scenery, proximity to the river, the warm climate are all deemed to be well-suited to active recreation and green tourism. There are also ideas about how to make use of the sun and wind by installing solar panels, wind turbines and electric vehicle charging stations.

The multicultural background of the village can be viewed as an asset. Apart from nurturing the Swedish heritage, the need is also mentioned of highlighting the German and Ukrainian cultural heritage. Suggestions were made to create a meeting place, for example around a museum or library, for Swedes and Germans, as well as to cooperate with a university to spread knowledge of local history, national diversity and cultural identity.

Several also underline the importance of social investments, such as support for children, youths, the elderly and farmers, as well as efforts for mental and material security. It is all about building up a community where there is space for development, education, spare time and fellowship.

To sum up, the future for the village is not only about its historic roots, but about a combination of work, security, education, nature, culture and opportunities, where people's lives and daily life can again be accommodated.

Which possible future activities, both new and traditional do you think would make the village interesting? Compilation of free text.

Many envisage a future for the village as a combination of traditional industries and new ventures. Agriculture is still the foundation, particularly vegetable cultivation, potato growing, viticulture and livestock – poultry and cattle. Several express hope of developing organic farming, where the local population can grow fruit and vegetables in the own gardens, and where the products would be processed and sold directly from the village. There are also ideas of small-scale factories or small production facilities for cheese, breads and pastries, preserves, fruit and vegetable products. A smaller bakery and a facility similar to the large ketchup factory Chumak are mentioned as role models. The opportunity to sell home produce is raised as important.

Tourism is another central idea for the future, both traditional and green tourism. Several wish to develop recreation grounds, parks and activities along the river. There are proposals to create a recreation facility for visitors from Ukraine and abroad. Ecotourism, angling, home-baked bread, beekeeping, furniture manufacturing and branded merchandise are also mentioned as possible tourist attractions. The possibility of restoring the dam is viewed as a huge step forward for the entire district.

The villagers' history is deep and multifaceted, with roots from Swedish, German and Ukrainian Boykos. This cultural heritage is viewed as being a great asset. Many also express a wish to restore the churches, cultural institutions and monuments, as well as to develop a culture centre and a museum. One idea is to create a folklore-ensemble for adults and children, where the Swedish language, poetry, songs and traditions are preserved and passed down to the next generation. Continued exchange between Sweden and Ukraine has been suggested, not only for Swedish descendants, but for all the children in the village, as a component in a more extensive education programme about the Swedish cultural heritage. Folk and folk art festivals and the revival of old traditions are viewed as a way to strengthen the soul of the village.

Education, health care and child care are also issues raised as fundamental for the future. Many want to see schools, pre-schools, hospitals and leisure centres rebuilt, as well as investment of resources in youth creativity, sports arenas, playgrounds and swimming baths.

Some replies display scepticism or sorrow. Several say that the village once thrived, that it was lively and with many youngsters, but that it is now destroyed. It is difficult for some to envisage the future before the infrastructure has been restored. Water, electricity and gas must be available if people are to return. But there is hope yet, that provided the village can be rebuilt, its culture is preserved and investments are made, many envisage a future where both old traditions and new activities will thrive.

Establishment Opportunities

Agriculture and tourism have already been part of village life and have been significant components of its identity. With the aim of making Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka an attractive place to live in, we have compiled proposals for how both existing and new activities can be developed. The establishment opportunities presented here ae based on experiences from former projects, local initiative and ideas which have been discussed both in the village and with Swedish partners. The focus is on reinforcing small-scale agriculture and tourism, but also on paving the way for new ideas, such as teleworking within IT, sustainable water solutions and future public services.

Agriculture

Before the war, agriculture in the district was small-scale. Between 2016 and 2019, an agricultural project was carried out in a municipal partnership between the Gotland Municipality and Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka, financed by ICLD (International Centre for Local Democracy). The project aimed at bolstering agriculture through awareness-building activities and experience sharing between Sweden and Ukraine.

Study visits were made both on Gotland and at modern agriculture farms and processing plants in Ukraine. The project also invited some of Ukraine's most prominent crop production experts in the potato branch to give lectures in the village itself. This resulted in numerous discussions on how the village could raise the level of processing, such as beginning to produce crisps. The farmers also talked a lot about the possibilities of increasing cooperation, for example, as regards machines. The project also examined different sales outlets and how sales could be developed mutually, so as to improve profitability.

Within the project, soil analyses and water assessments were carried out. One conclusion was that a larger-scale agriculture would be dependent on the re-establishment of the former irrigation system in the steppe. At the same time, there was a fragmented and indistinct structure for land ownership, which caused concern among the villagers. Each household owned about four hectares in the steppe within a land tenure system.

A land reform came into force in Ukraine in 2021, which sanctioned the buying and selling of farmland, something which had been prohibited earlier. As a first step, only Ukrainian private people could buy up to 100 hectares, then in 2024, Ukrainian companies could buy up to 10,000 hectares. Foreign purchasers were still not allowed without a referendum. The reform aimed at opening up the market, reinforcing property rights and reducing corruption. Simultaneously, there was a feeling of apprehension in the village about large-scale land purchase.

Prior to the land reform, the 2019-project interviewed a number of farmers in Zmijivka on their views on land ownership, livelihood and the future. Several expressed a fear that the small landholders would not be able to afford to buy their own land. Even if the price of land was lower than in Western Europe, it was still beyond the means for many, due to high interest rates (c. 24%) and limited access to capital. There was also a high degree of uncertainty as to how the market would develop, and whether the law in practice would favour large-scale or foreign actors at the cost of the local farmers.

Profitability was hard to achieve from organic farming. Despite a certain demand, the willingness to pay was low on the domestic market, and export opportunities were deemed to be limited. Several farmers saw new crops or larger-scale production as possible ways forward, but at the same time, the practical and economic obstacles, that a smallholder faced, were emphasised.

Tourism

Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka has been an attractive tourist destination above all for Swedes since Ukraine became independent in 1991. Curious descendants, as well as other interested parties, have visited the village to listen to the Old Swedish language and find out about their fascinating stories, which the elderly Svenskbybor could share, not least from the Second World War and the Soviet Period.

Many were also interested in seeing the Swedish church. Seeing it empty also aroused interest, so too - with luck - seeing the house which their relatives left in 1929. The village has a beautiful location beside the River Dnipro with verdant surroundings, such as Gravgårdsvarde Park and the bathing place at the ravine just north of the village, places which are of great natural beauty. Many visitors have described it as a journey in time, a sense of peace and tranquility, reminiscent of 1950s' Sweden. Most people here are self-sufficient, often with a small farm with a goat, a cow and some hens or geese. Since there has not been any commercial accommodation in the village, visitors have often lodged in people's private homes, mainly of the Swedish-speaking families, who have offered full board and lodging with homemade food. For many years, being part of life in the village has offered a rewarding experience.

2017-2020 saw the implementation of a project between the Gotland Municipality and Gammansvenskby/Zmijivka, 'A Pilot Study in a Time of Change', financed by the ICLD (International Centre for Local Democracy). The results of the project included the villagers' wish to establish two museums themselves, an open-air museum with an Old Swedish house, and an exhibition in the former village tavern, which would relate the history of the village both for the locals and for visitors from afar. In 2020, the Svenskby Museum was to be inaugurated, but was thwarted by the pandemic and later the war. There were also plans to create a more structured accommodation operation, as a tandem project with the local pubs, which would also provide food, as an alternative for visitors who preferred independent accommodation.

After the war, many will want to visit the village again, perhaps still mainly descendants from all over the world, but also others, who have been made aware of Gammalsvenskby through stories, newspaper/magazine articles and news reports in connection with Russia's war in Ukraine. For

these visitors, it will be important for the village to retain its character and structure. It will be important to be able to visit the Swedish church, the culture centre and the museums. Of equal importance is that the street network is preserved, so that visitors can continue to find their relatives' plot of land. Architectonic details, such as the small rendered houses with decorated gables of wood, richly-coloured gates and blue-painted window frames, all contribute to recognition and identity.

Several of the houses, not least the churches, have been destroyed in past times, but have also been rebuilt and again become important and beautiful features in the village, even though they are not exactly the same as the originals.

A natural step in the future of the village would be to create more organised accommodation for visitors, as a supplement to staying in people's private homes. It could be a B&B in conjunction with pubs for those who prefer their own accommodation. A simpler hotel or hostel could accommodate organised group travel, which would increase accessibility for more to experience Gammalsvenskby's/Zmijivka's unique history and environment. Zmijivka could also be a location and resource for a health centre, which could offer hikes featuring sport and health or a rehabilitation centre with group therapy.

The Blasting of the Kachovka Dam

The blasting of the Kahovka Dam by the Russians in June 2023 has led to far-reaching consequences for all of Southern Ukraine, not least for Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka, situated 25 km upstream. The dam, which formerly regulated the flow in the River Dnipro via the Kakhovka reservoir, played a decisive role for water supply, energy production and agriculture in the region.

When the dam burst, the reservoir was swiftly emptied, which led to the irrigation systems in Southern Ukraine being wiped out. These systems were crucial for agriculture in one of the country's most fertile districts. Large areas of agricultural land in the regions of Kherson, Saporizjzja and Dnieporpetrovsk have thereafter been difficult or even impossible to cultivate. Gammalsvenskby, which was situated in this area, has thus been subjected to deteriorated cultivation conditions.

Over and above this, the level of the ground water has sunk drastically upstream, and many wells have dried up as a result, even in villages at a distance from the actual dam. As regards Gammalsvenskby, this has meant that both the drinking water supply and the possibility of local irrigation have been drastically reduced. The destruction of the dam has also mean serious energy loss, since the Kachovka hydro-electric plant was totally destroyed. This has affected the entire regional electrical system negatively.

Tourist opportunities have also been affected, since the water mirror has gone, and it is difficult to develop water activities such as boat trips and fishing. Another important consequence is that the upstream waterway in the River Dnipro to the large harbours is no longer navigable, because the water level has sunk to such a degree that both transport and supply routes via the river have been disrupted. This affects both trade and possibilities of water transport.

The destruction of the Kachovka dam has resulted in an environmental and infrastructural disaster, which has changed the life situation for Gammalsvenskby. The prerequisites for agriculture, water supply, access to energy and logistics have fundamentally changed, and these new conditions need to be taken into consideration in the case of future reconstruction of the village and the region as a whole.

Water

Access to safe water is a basic requirement for settlement, agriculture and local development. Already prior to the war there were challenges concerning the water and sewage systems, and today the situation is even more acute. Below, earlier investigations and proposals, as well as new solutions which may contribute to securing the village's water supply in the long run are described.

The infrastructure for water supply in Zmijivka has partly been destroyed, as a result of Russia's war of invasion. There was never any functioning sewage system earlier. In 2018, Jonas Aaw conducted a water investigation within the framework of an ICLD project. The investigation produced an important picture of the situation before the war, and aimed at charting the requirements for drinking water, sewage and waste disposal in the area.

The investigation revealed that there was a great need of improving both the water supply and sewage infrastructure, in order to protect health and environment in the long run. It was recommended that the quality of the ground water should be examined more closely, particularly in view of the risks from pesticides and other pollutants. A further recommendation was that a new piping network with strategic valves should be built, and that water consumption should be measured, both by the consumer and at production source. Clear documentation and regulations were deemed as necessary to ensure and control water supply. As regards sewage and rubbish, the investigation underlined the need of a strategic decision - if water closets (WC) were to be permitted in the future, a functioning sewage system will be an absolute necessity. In order to protect the ground water, proper waste management should be introduced.

To sum up, the investigation revealed that both technological investments and administrative measures were necessary to secure water resources and protect the environment in Zmijivka, a judgement which has become more urgent in light of the destruction caused by the war.

Since the war broke out, Wayout, a Swedish technology company, specialising in sustainable water solutions, has initiated a collaboration with the Ukrainian government to support the reconstruction of the country following the destruction of vital infrastructure. In cooperation with Siemens and Alfa Laval, the company focused on solving the acute water crisis in the wartorn regions such as Kherson by installing micro-factories for local purification of water into usable drinking water. Every plant from Wayout has the capacity to produce up to 20,000 litres of mineralised water per day, which corresponds to the daily needs of up to 10,000 people. The solution is based on local water production, which minimises carbon dioxide emission and eliminates the need of long-haul transportation of water bottles or tankers. The construction of the system makes it self-sufficient, robust and quickly operational even in districts with limited infrastructure.

Wayout's commitment in Ukraine is part of a broader initiative to re-establish basic societal functions, with particular focus on usable drinking water as a human right and a prerequisite for life, health and agriculture. Apart from technological implementation, the company also contributes with exchange of knowledge and experience within the water and sewage systems, in close dialogue with Ukrainian partners. The company has expressed an interest in establishing themselves in the district around Gammalsvenskby, where water supply has been seriously affected by the destruction of the Kachovka dam. Future cooperation might contribute to secure access to usable drinking water and support local recovery and agricultural production.

IT-Companies in the Rural Areas

The war has changed the youth's perspective on the rural areas in Ukraine. Now, an increasing number want to live closer to family and nature, while they work remotely, for example within IT. We shall now present thoughts and ideas as to how Gammalsvenskby might become an ideal location for young professionals.

Several testify that the IT-branch's attitudes among youths to living in rural areas in Ukraine has changed. Earlier, the youths wanted to move to larger cities to get an education and make a career there. But since the outbreak of the war, starting when Russia occupied Crimea in 2014 and even more so since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the attitude towards living in rural areas has changed. An increasing number of youths need to take care of their elderly relatives in the countryside, and they are also beginning to understand the opportunities offered when actually settling down there.

For security reasons, several youths from Kyjiv have sought their way to safer locations in Ukraine. In Western Ukraine, for example, they can live in rural areas and still work with and make a career within IT, for example, or remote selling. A Ukrainian man described how his young friends had moved out into the countryside and alongside their IT-work, also started to grow crops and have even procured some goats and cows - as a step in reinforcing resilience and being more prepared for crises or war.

Beetroot is a Swedish-Ukrainian IT-company, which specialises in forming teams of developers and designers from Ukraine for international projects. According to Andreas Flodström, MD of Beetroot, it is actually fundamentally simple to create opportunities to work with IT in Gammalsvenskby. What is needed is good broadband, electricity supply and backup by way of Starlink-solutions or similar. Quite simply, you need the prerequisites for being continuously online, and with high-speed internet, then you've solved 80% of the issue. The rest is concerned with training. This is generally something that cannot be done locally; most of Beetroot's training courses are online, ranging from short 'computer literacy' courses to longer bootcamps – practical courses, which prepare you for a career within IT.

So, the conclusion is that there should be an interest among youths to settle down in Zmijivka and work from home. But this will require broadband, electricity supply, backup and perhaps also an office hotel which would provide a creative working environment.

Sustainable and Innovative Solutions

If youths and other inhabitants are to choose to return to Gammalsvenskby, it is important that the reconstruction focuses on long-term and climate-smart solutions. This creates the opportunity not only to reconstruct, but also to create something new, a model for what the villages of the future might look like.

Gammalsvenskby could be developed into a pilot village for sustainability and innovative building. The district has good natural potential, with good access to both sun and wind, which opens up for investments in local production of energy, such as solar cell parks and perhaps small-scale wind turbines. Moreover, there would be a potential for the development of new water resources through irrigation dams, for example.

Since the village's culture centres have been totally destroyed, this opens up for embellishing certain buildings with a completely new, modern expression. For example, perhaps a completely new culture centre with a library could be built in a modern Nordic design, so as to introduce the Swedish origins in the new village.

In the years of 2020 and 2022, technical studies of houses in Gammalsvenskby were carried out by the students Kauranen & Lindström at Lund University. Their tutor was Dennis Johansson. They discovered that the dwellings were extremely inefficient from an energy perspective, as well as having problems with moisture and ventilation. Their recommendations were the installation of heating pumps, the addition of external insulation to the exterior walls, and in certain cases, solar cell installations.

In connection with reconstruction, opportunities now arise to erect modern, energy-efficient houses from the foundations, with climate-adapted solutions for water and sewage. This would create the prerequisites for more sustainable housing and an improved standard of living. There is great potential for developing these ideas further, in cooperation with relevant actors both in Sweden and Ukraine. Gammalsvenskby could thus become a role model for how reconstruction could unite historic anchorage with the demands of the future for environmental and social sustainability.

Cooperation between the Public and Civil Community

In order to persuade the population, especially the youths, to return, it is important that the initiative stems from community institutions such as the municipality and the state. But a decisive factor is also that the civil community on-site is part of the process. The citizens must be included and active participants in the planning; their involvement is absolutely essential for the future of the village.

The municipal administration of Beryslav has shown deep commitment to supporting its population, both humanely and democratically, despite the fact that the municipality is located in one of Ukraine's most vulnerable districts. Despite the harsh conditions in the frontal zone, they work actively with humanitarian efforts and community building measures. Focus is on meeting

basic needs and maintaining a well-functioning social structure, including in wartime. The administration has also been committed to preserving the democratic civic participation through digital platforms. There, inhabitants, many of whom are internally displaced people from Gammalsvenskby, can participate in questionnaires, decision processes and planning work. Furthermore, special support centres, hubs, have been set up in the frontier zones where people are offered aid and advice.

Gammalsvenskby also has several strong local organisations, such as the German Evangelist-Lutheran Church and the Ukrainian-Orthodox Parish. Despite the war, these have maintained contact with their members and offer aid. The parishes also cooperate with each other, and their work to create unity in a difficult time is of great significance.

Since 2024, there is also a new voluntary foundation, The Heritage and Revival Fund of Gammalsvenskby, which was formed to support the community in Zmijika. The foundation focuses on helping soldiers from Gammalsvenskby and their families, who have suffered from the war, as well as to contribute to the reconstruction of the village. Behind the initiative are people from different backgrounds, teachers, economists, lawyers, who take part voluntarily for the sake of the future of the village. Eight of them have completed a special course on voluntary work and NGO-activities. All these Ukrainian organisations cooperate with and have the support of international actors. Sweden is one of the strongest mainstays for the village.

The voluntary association 'Föreningen Svenskbyborna' was founded in 1954 by former villagers from Gammalsvenskby. Since 1991, the association has carried out relief work on site, financed by fundraising, private donations, clubs and foundations. Their humanitarian assistance is based on the villagers' needs and builds on close and trustworthy relationships with both private people, organisations and the municipality. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of 2022, the chairperson of the association, Sofia Hoas, has regularly reported on the situation in the village to Sweden, which has made it a significant source both for media and Swedes who are actively involved. They cooperate with other Swedish relief organisations, such as Power Up Ukraine, Direct Ukraine and Swedish Rescuers.

Region Gotland has been a twin town with Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka since 2001. Since 2014, they have conducted the ICLD-financed democracy project with focus on democracy development, agriculture and cultural heritage tourism. The original cooperation took place with the local village council and has achieved a strong mutual trust.

Since 2024, a new democracy project between Region Gotland and Beryslav Raion has been ongoing. The project focuses on knowledge sharing as regards institutional capacity building in the municipalities, with particular focus on how we can persuade the population, particularly the younger generation, to return to Gammalsvenskby, as well as the younger Gotlanders to stay and return Gotland.

Beryslav and Region Gotland also participate in the Network for Democratic Resilience 2024-2026, which is funded by the International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD). The aim is to join forces in meeting the challenge of maintaining and reinforcing democratic institutions in

times of adversity. Twelve Swedish-Ukrainian partnerships participate in the network, where they are offered three years of training, study visits and experience exchange. One specific project has also been initiated by Visby Diocese to support both the Swedish and the Ukrainian Orthodox parish in the village.

Gotland Museum runs a project (2024-2025) The Cultural Heritage in Gammalsvenskby, funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, acting on behalf of the Government. The project is carried out in close cooperation with Beryslav Raion. Apart from compiling this cultural Environmental Plan, the project aims to contribute to aiding the internally displaced people from the village with delivery of vehicles, wood briquettes and medicines. In June 2025, a summer camp on Gotland was arranged for children from the village, to give them a much-needed break from the war. These co-actions demonstrate how the civil society and the public sector can work side-by-side, in order to create security, strength and faith in the future in one of the most difficult situations of our time.

Experiences from Similar Projects

International experiences indicate that cultural heritage can be a strong driving force in the reconstruction following a conflict and crisis. In the Western Balkans, the Baltics and Ukraine, it has been demonstrated that historic buildings, places and traditions can provide societal development with both symbolic and practical support.

A well-known example is the rebuilding of Stari Most in Mostar after the war in the 1990s. The bridge, which was destroyed in 1993, was reconstructed in 2004 in cooperation with UNESCO, The World Bank Group and local participants. Apart from restoring a historic building, the project created a powerful symbol for atonement and community, and the bridge soon became a magnet for tourism. The recurring tradition of jumping off the bridge was resurrected and contributed to putting the city on the international map. Experiences from here demonstrate that a single, distinct cultural heritage item can be a driving force both for local pride and economic development.

The organisation Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB) has also worked on the restoration of cultural heritage, artisan training and local participation on a broad basis in the Balkan region. Their project underlines the importance of combining technical know-how with local participation, which both reinforces identity and provides skills which can lead to job opportunities.

In the Baltics, networks such as the Baltic Region Heritage Committee and EU-funding programmes have highlighted cultural heritage as a resource for regional development and tourism. These have demonstrated that smaller towns have much to gain by collaborating across national borders to develop common thematic routes and marketing strategies together. By coordinating their cultural heritage across borders, they have succeeded in attracting more visitors than what any individual village would have managed alone.

In Ukraine, work during the on-going war has mainly been geared to salvaging, documenting and planning for reconstruction. UNESCO has created Lviv Culture Hub, a meeting place which combines education, cultural therapy and innovation as a support for people in wartime. This demonstrates how cultural institutions can function as secure hubs for social recovery and societal development even in harsh conditions. Simultaneously, documentation of damage caused to the cultural heritage throughout the country is being recorded, which will form a basis for the future reconstruction.

For a village like Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka, much knowledge has been gained from these experiences. The reconstruction of one or two symbolic buildings, such as a church or a library/culture centre, can create both identity and lasting appeal within tourism, as in the case of Mostar. Linking endeavours with daily life, through courses in craftsmanship and building preservation, development of small firms within the hospitality industry and promotion of local traditions, will all lead to a firmer anchorage. Baltic experiences also demonstrate the worth of regional collaboration, whereby the village can be linked to larger networks of cultural routes, thereby attracting more visitors.

All in all, these examples demonstrate that the cultural heritage is not just a question of memories from the past, but a concrete resource for the future. By combining restoration, local participation and cooperation with regional and international actors, a small village will be able to form an attractive and resilient future.

Strategy for the Dissesmination of the Cultural Environmental Plan

The cultural environmental plan will be available in three languages: Swedish and English, in a PDF-format. The plan will be delivered to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and distributed to the interested parties, who have been contacted by the project. It will also be published on Gotland Museum's website and distributed through the association 'Föreningen Svenskyborna's information channels.

In cooperation with Beryslav Raion, the plan will be distributed to the internally displaced people from Gammalsvenskby/Zmijivka. The plan will be printed and distributed physically to the villagers who lack digital tools.

Our hopes are that the plan will arouse involvement and lead to feedback, ideas and further contributions to the continued work on Gammalsvenskby's/Zmijivka's future.

Sources

Literature:

Hedman J. & Åhlander, L., 2003. Historien om Gammalsvenskby och svenskarna i Ukraina. Dialogos. Kristianstad.

Hedman, J. 2019. Historiska handlingar rörande dagösvenskarna och svenskbyborna. Digitaltryck i Kungsbacka AB.

Hedman, J., (med postum medverkan av Lars Åhlander). 2023. Historien om Gammalsvenskby och svenskättlingarna i Ukraina. eddy.se ab, Visby.

Peter Knutas.2019. Svenskbyborna 90 år i Sverige. Föreningen Svenskbyborna. Föreningen Svenskbyborna, Bokprojektet AB.

Svedberg, G. & Mårtensson, E., 2001. Gammalsvenskby – en by i Ukraina. J. R. Hain förlag. Sarwe, W. 1929. Bland Rysslands folk. Gammalsvenskby del III. Svenska Missionsförbundets förlag, Stockholm.

Beryslavs kommun. 2021. "Історія серця степу: Бериславська громада крізь століття" (Historien om stäppens hjärta: Beryslav-området genom århundradena).

Reports:

Jonas Aaw. 2018. Vattenutredning Zmijivka. Projektet ICLD jordbruk 2016-2019.

Viktor Kauranen & Philip Lindström. 2020. Utvärdering av energi och inomhusklimat i bostäder i Gammalsvenskby, Ukraina. Kandidat, Lunds universitet. Handledare: Dennis Johansson.

Viktor Kauranen. 2022. Lowering energy need and improving indoor climate – A case study of rural dwellings in Gammalsvenskby. Master Lunds universitet. Handledare: Dennis Johansson & Lars-Erik Harderup.

Föreningen Svenskbyborna. Hoas, S. 2022-2025. Rapporter från Gammalsvenskby.

BRHC. 2012. Heritage and Sustainable Development in the Baltic Sea Region. Baltic Region Heritage Committee.

CHwB. 2014. Restoration Camps in the Western Balkans – Building Capacity through Heritage. Cultural Heritage without Borders.

UNESCO. 2005. Reconstruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar. Paris: UNESCO Publishing. UNESCO. 2023. Culture in Ukraine during wartime: Lviv Culture Hub initiative. Report on Damages to Cultural Heritage in Ukraine. Paris: UNESCO.

People referred to:

Carl Sturén, Consul Odessa

Bo Lagerqvist, Cultural Heritage without Borders

Andreas Flodström, MD Beetroot

Lars Blomfeldt, Chief Financial Officer, Wayout

Lars Thomsson, Annette Glover, Region Gotland

Yana Yakoleva, Mykola Kurivchak, Beryslav Raion

Roman Mykhaltsov, The Heritage and Revival Fund of Gammalsvenskby



