

# Daniel S. Johnson

## - Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστὸς ἠνέστη!

June/July 2013

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Church officials from the Lithuanian, Latvian and Siberian Lutheran churches frequently visit the United States. If you wish to invite one of these church officials to visit your congregation, please contact me at:

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Did you know that 52% of residents of Latvia are Latvian ethnically? They are called Letts.

The Latvian language is one of the oldest in Europe. It is related to Sanskrit, a language of ancient India.

Latvia is a very literate country with a 98.8% literacy rate.

Latvians have a rather high life expectancy with the total population averaging 79.68 years: (*male*: 76.75 years and *female*: 82.81 years)

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### The Ruth Oexman Story: Harsh times for Latvia and her people (Part 1)

[Part 2 & 3 will follow in subsequent newsletters]

"The cold and lack of food was finally taking its toll on our bodies. Sores and boils were breaking out all over," says Ruth Oexman, a refugee from Soviet-controlled Latvia during World War II. Ruth now lives in Kansas City, Missouri with her husband, Homer. She tells her family's story, of how they were forced to flee their Latvian home to escape from the advancing Russian Army. The year was 1944 and Ruth was 13 years old.

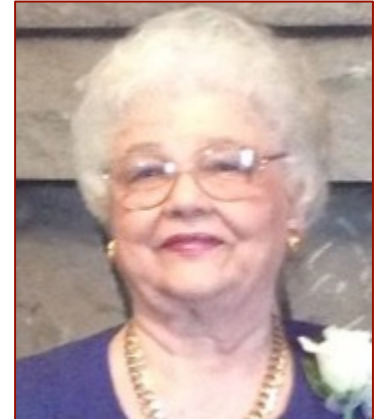
Ruth's husband, my wife and I sit around a kitchen table, sipping tea and eating homemade banana bread. We listen to her recall the months of homelessness and starvation as Latvian refugees in Germany. Ruth, now 82 years old, describes her Latvian homeland. "The small but beautiful country, with dark forests, rivers and lakes, I call mine, is Latvia." Latvia is located on the coast of the Baltic Sea, nestled between Estonia and Lithuania. A little larger than the state of West Virginia, Latvia sits across the Baltic Sea from Sweden and Finland. Due to her strategic placement, Latvia has, for most of her history, been occupied or governed by non-Latvians. "The Teutonic Knights, Germans, Swedes, Russians and Poles have all forced their will on the Latvian people," says Mrs. Oexman. "Only between World War I and World War II, did our people taste independence."

"By miracle of birth," she continues, in her strong Latvian accent. "I came into being in the place and time in history when the world was about to be turned upside-down. Two great powers eventually destroyed my dreams, my family, my nation, and millions of people's lives."

Russia invaded Latvia, in June of 1940, in spite of a treaty between Latvia and Russia to recognize Latvia's autonomy. With contempt and great emotion, Ruth describes the process of how Stalin and Hitler, following the outline of a "secret protocol," divided up the sovereign nations of the Baltics and Poland. Hitler was granted Lithuania and western Poland. Stalin was given political control of Estonia, Finland, eastern Poland and Latvia. The uncompromising and capricious dictatorship of Stalin was inflicted on the Latvian people.

"We learned quickly that the new government was not, 'by the people.'" With great sadness, she retells how the government enslaved the people and demanded obedience. "The dissidents were arrested and sent to Siberia's labor camps." During this occupation, she estimates that over 100,000 people in Latvia and other occupied territories in the region were forced into cattle cars and freighted into exile. "Political and intellectual leaders were sent in railway cars to Siberia, as was my uncle," she says, looking down into her teacup. "Many died in that harsh climate and the work camps."

"By this time, every knock on **continued on next page**





## Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Please pray for the Lutherans in Latvia and those who proclaim the incarnation of Jesus. Pray that the preached Word is heard and believed.

Many Latvian pastors serve multiple congregation parishes. Pray for safe travel as these dedicated clergy travel to provide care for their parishioners. Also, pray for the laity as they travel to attend liturgy.

Pray for the Latvian catechumens as they learn the Christian vocation.

Pray for the faith and perseverance of the Latvian people as they are confronted with the dangers of an increasingly secular culture.

**Be gracious to us.  
Spare us, good Lord.  
Be gracious to us.  
Help us, good Lord.**  
The Litany

the door was a nightmare. The government did not give a reason to enter your home, day or night, to search for, whatever, and to seize, whomever. “ Families would “literally disappear in the night.” Many families were forced from the small communities to move to the cities. It was during this time that Ruth’s family moved to Riga, the capitol of Latvia. “We endured the hardships of Stalin’s ruthless dictatorship and struggled to survive.”

In 1941, Hitler invaded Latvia. Any hope for relief from the abuses inflicted by the Stalinist occupation was soon dashed, as the Nazi-controlled German army exerted an equally harsh and oppressive control over the Latvian people. It was during this period that Ruth’s thirty-eight year old mother succumbed to cancer. “I saw my whole world collapse. I asked, ‘Why, God?’” Her mom’s Russian language skills had been vital in helping the family survive during Soviet control. “But who can question the wisdom of God in living or dying? There is a purpose in God’s wisdom.”

A year later, in 1942 Ruth’s father remarried and Ruth gained a stepsister. Instead of Russian, her new stepmother spoke German. “What a blessing!” Ruth exclaims, as she recalls those days when her family was forced to exist in German-occupied Latvia. “We were Latvians, with a mother who spoke German!” But the Jews, those who were her neighbors and her friends, did not fare so well under Nazi rule. “The horror and pain that was inflicted upon these people because of their race, convictions and belief are indescribable.” With great pain in her eyes, she talks about how these people were forced to walk in the gutters and were shamefully marked with the ‘Star of David.’ What especially affected her as a young teenage girl, was to see her own friends, who happened to be Jewish, treated “worst than dogs.” Under Nazi military rule, “fear and hate was unleashed like a mad dog and those, in its path, suffered beyond belief.” It was during this time that Ruth’s parents withdrew them from the public schools due to the Nazi propaganda being taught. **(To be continued in the August 2013 newsletter) ✕ DSJ**



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