

Daniel S. Johnson

- Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστὸς ὠκρесп!

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Lutherans in exile – in Siberia

As I travel through Siberia, I often see signs and advertisements bringing attention to the philosophy of the people and to the remote nature of the region. Siberia covers over 5 million square miles. The entire continental United States plus Alaska can fit into the boundaries of Siberia. The region has been known for its vast resources of iron, gold, nickel, oil, gas and other valuable natural resources -- not to exclude lumber. The infrastructure in Siberia suffers from extreme weather. Due to this, a willingness to commit resources to a constantly losing battle with the elements is absent. Most of the Siberian population lives along the southern trade route. The cold weather and inhospitable environment of the northern region of Siberia make it unbearably difficult for many to survive. During the days of the Czars, and continued during the Soviet days, political prisoners and criminals would be exiled or sent to prisons in Siberia. Many of Stalin's notorious "death camps" were located in Siberia. One such camp was located near Tuim where a congregation of the Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church is located.



This is a sign along the highway warning travelers not to stop along the road due to the activity of bandits. It informs the traveler that, "the next police station will be in 60 km."

In the northern regions where hunting and fishing is not so plentiful, the only attraction for living in such harsh conditions has been the lure of a job and the promise of a paycheck. Since the 18th century working in the northern oil fields and mining villages was a common occupation among those exiled to Siberia.

In Darius Petkunas' book, The Repression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lithuania during the Stalinist Era, he mentions how many from the Baltics were sent to the northern Siberian mining villages as slave laborers – in actuality they were sent as political prisoners, usually due to ethnic heritage, religious confession or political persuasion.* For not just a few, the exile to Siberia was a decision of authorities, to impose guilt on individuals whose only "crime" was to be born into a certain family or to have been baptized at a certain font. For others, the sentence was due to a false accusation by a political informant, claiming a certain individual to be an "enemy of the state" – simply by unproven accusation or by an innocent association with a notorious individual.

One such false accusation is mentioned by Petkunas. Pastor Jurgis Gavenis of the Lithuanian Jurbarkas congregation (as well as congregations in 4 other surrounding cities) was "surrounded by [Soviet] agents who were willing to twist his words and even make up reports in order to curry favor and keep their jobs. He was effectively portrayed as an enemy of the people and would have to be dealt with" (p. 101). He had allegedly, "engaged in anti-Soviet activities, preached against the regime, and possessed materials critical of the Soviet Union" (p. 113). Pastor Gavenis was seen as a "dangerous criminal." His sentence for such a "crime against the state" was to be hard and long. He was deprived of his property. His wife and children were evicted. His passport was burned and rights of citizenship revoked. **continued on the next page**



Sign along the road from Novosibirsk to Tomsk: "If there are roads, then there will be life."

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: Daniel.Johnson@lcsintl.org





Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Many Baltic and Siberian 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 Lutheran catechumens throughout the world as they learn the Christian vocation.

Pray for those Lutherans “in exile” who have not been given opportunity to receive preaching from the mouth and the Holy Sacraments from the hand of a Lutheran pastor. Pray they can again sing like Zechariah: *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David...”*

***We poor sinners implore You.
To hear us, O Lord.
-- The Litany***



He even lost his name. The official documents of exile identified him with only a number. Without property, family, name and citizenship, Pastor Gavenis was “sent to one of the harshest and most notorious camps in the entire soviet Gulag” (p. 118). The coal-mining city of Vorkuta was a forced labor camp located in the far northern foothills of the Ural Mountains, 160 km north of the Arctic Circle -- a mere 90 km from the Arctic Ocean. (The author commits several pages describing the conditions of the camp and the respect earned by the integrity and “incorruptible, hardworking” nature of the Baltic prisoners – many being Lutheran.)

Thousands of stories similar to Pastor Gavenis’ have been told. Though Gaventis was eventually released, due to good behavior, many never survived the harsh labor and living conditions. Those who survived and were not allowed to return to their homeland account for the many “exiled” Lutherans still living in remote regions of Siberia. Many of these Lutherans have never seen a Lutheran pastor. Some have never been baptized or received the Lord’s Supper. Many are told about their Lutheran roots by grandparents or relatives.

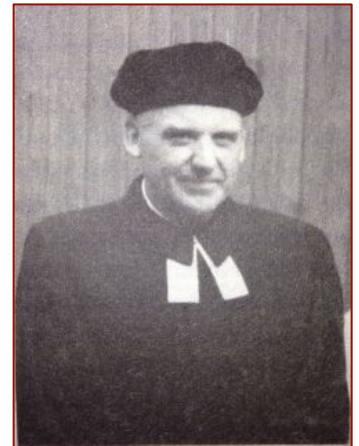
Rev. Daniel Burlakov, Pastor of St. Mary Lutheran Church in Tomsk, about 300 km north of Novosibirsk, has learned about some “exiled” Lutherans living in the northern cities of Strezevoy and Aleksandrovskoe. (You may read his letter concerning plans for a “pastoral expedition” to these cities in my February 2014 newsletter). Since there are no roads to these cities; no direct train routes; and travel by airplane or by “ice highway” (travel on the river by winter) is difficult and dangerous, one is left to travel to these cities in the summer by remote roads and river ferry.

If you are interested in financing our “pastoral expedition” to the remote cities of Strezevoy and Aleksandrovskoe, you may send a donation to:

**The Siberian Lutheran Mission Society (SLMS)
c/o Mr. Bob Kiefer
Ascension Lutheran Church
8811 St. Joe Rd.
Fort Wayne, IN 46835
(For Rev. Burlakov’s mission)**

The Lord’s peace be with you! ✠ DSJ

* Rev. Dr. Darius Petkunas serves as a clergyman in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Palanga. His research includes a survey of several Lithuanian clergy who suffered persecution, during the Soviet era, simply because they were Lutheran.



Pastor Jurgis Gavenis, was exiled to the Siberian labor camp of Vorkuta in 1949-1956

To support my work financially, you may send a tax-deductible gift to:

**The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
P.O. Box 790089
St. Louis, MO 63179-0089.**

**Make checks payable to “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “
Write “Support of Rev. Daniel S. Johnson” on the memo line. Gifts can also be given securely online through the LCMS website, on my online giving page at www.lcms.org/Johnson.**