

Daniel S. Johnson

- Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστος Воскрес!

September 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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Christians first arrived in the region in the 12th century when Augustinians from Germany began missionary activity. When Lutherans arrived, their presence was immediately evident. It was through the Lutheran influence that a written language and a grammar were developed.

As early as 1525 a Lutheran "Missale" was printed with three parallel texts. In 1586 a translation of Luther's "Mažais Katechisms" (The Little Catechism), was published. By the 17th century the Bible, a Lutheran hymnal and a sermon book had been published.

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Ruth Oexman: 'Our gracious God was always there' Part 3

(Part 1 & 2 appeared in June/July & August 2013 newsletters. Copies can be received upon request)

It was in December when they were relocated "somewhere near the Czechoslovakian border."

They had been drifters for over three months, being shuffled from one camp to the next. It was at this camp where she tells of how the men would sneak out under the cover of darkness, slip across the Czech border and bring back "that wonderful staple of life" – bread. December also brought Christmas.

The Christmas of 1944 is one she always remembers. There was no tree, no gifts, no church and no pastor to lead the Christmas liturgy. And yet, among all the refugees, speaking different languages and bearing different customs, "there was something very special in the greetings of 'Merry Christmas.' Our Christmas dinner was a dish of 'cream of wheat.' It was a special Christmas!"

After taking another sip of her tea, Ruth paused and recalled how the rigors of constantly living on the move had weakened her otherwise young strong body. It was starting to show signs of weakening. "The cold and lack of food was taking its toll," she says into her cup. Sores and boils had begun to break out. The pain was unbearable. "I still have scars all over my body reminding me of those days." She told us how her stepmother would sit at night and pop the boils and drain the puss. It was very painful but it was necessary to prevent the spread of infection. However, she does not see the scars as only a sign of bad times. She also sees them as a constant reminder that God was always with them, protecting them and keeping them together throughout very dangerous and stressful days.

"Do you have any idea how it hurts when you are hungry, really hungry?" she asks us. "We went out and **continued on the next page**



Ruth with husband, Homer





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.

From the crafts and assaults of the devil; from sudden and evil death; from pestilence and famine; from war and bloodshed; ... Good Lord, deliver us.

-- The Litany

begged for bread, often forgetting which way to ask in German... *'Bitte etwas brot!'* ...Or is it, *'Etwas brot bitte?'* But they were understood, in any language. One time she said they saw a German woman throwing bread out for the geese to eat. "We ran up to her, fell onto the ground, on our knees, and gathered the bread off the dirt."

There was one time when she was outside washing her hair in an outdoor faucet, standing in snow. A German lady intently watching her invited Ruth and her family into her home. For the first time in months, Ruth received a warm bath and a full meal. The "big bed... was like heaven...Her hospitality and concern for us was beyond words... and our sores healed." All too soon, however, it was time for the family to move on. The war was continuing all around them and this homeless Latvian family was forced to keep on the move to avoid combat and bomb zones. At one time, in need of shelter and food, they were able to find help from a German farmer. Her stepmother's ability to speak German was an invaluable asset, as they constantly were at the mercy of the German citizens.

By the summer of 1945, the war was coming to an end. "As guided by God, we found ourselves in the American sector of Germany." In November 1945, Ruth and her family were taken to Ingolstadt, Bavaria to a camp for Latvian refugees. This was a camp created by the American Occupation Force as a way to address the needs of refugees fleeing Soviet controlled territory.

"That terrible war. It took away so much," Ruth observes. "It destroyed and separated families – some forever. Through all the hardships, fires and bombs, hunger and filth, my family was kept together. After arriving in the displaced persons camp, our parents tried to get word back home that we were all right." But the letters never got through. The Iron Curtain had risen and Ruth's homeland would be closed to the West. Latvia, along with other Soviet controlled countries and territories would be forced to endure almost a half-century of repressions.

"We did eventually learn that Grandpa, ...had died... a Russian family had moved into our home. Mother's brother had followed us into Germany. Not finding us, he returned to Latvia." Ruth never saw or heard from her uncle again. "Throughout our journey, our faith never wavered. Our gracious God was there on the boat and on the trains. He was there in the field. He was there in the barnyard. He kept us alive. He kept us together."

"In 1949, we were offered passage to America." A family in Joplin, Missouri sponsored her family, permitting them to come to The United States. On March 11, 1949, Ruth stepped foot for the first time on American soil. She was 16 years old. On May 15, 1958, Ruth Oexman became an American citizen. But she never forgot her first home in Latvia. She eventually met Homer Oexman, married and raised a family. They are now retired living in the Kansas City, Missouri area. In 1994, she returned to Latvia to visit. But that is a story best told on another day. ✘ DSJ



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