

THE SUFFERINGS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE GERMAN BAPTISTS (1863-1943)

When the Germans arrived in Volhynia in the early 1860s, they found that much of the land was swamp and covered with primeval forest. The swamps had to be drained and the huge trees, some measuring six feet across, had to be cut before cultivation could take place. In the early years the German settlers lived in dismal poverty, some literally in holes in the ground. Later they built sod huts and wooden shacks. They had no medical care. The mortality rate was high, especially among infants. It is said that in many instances the settlers had to have a dozen children to end up with six.

Although the majority of German settlers were Evangelical Lutheran there were also Baptists among them. It is unmistakably clear from both written and oral history that the Baptists in Volhynia were a suffering people. They suffered under the Tsars, the established churches, the Bolsheviks, the Communists, the Nazis and finally under Stalin himself, but few people know about their suffering and eventual triumph. There are no Anne Franks, no Schindler's lists, no holocaust museums, no Auschwitz's, no scholarly books, no newspaper articles or documentaries to chronicle their lives, only isolated stories passed down from generation to generation and bits and pieces found in the archives. They are a forgotten people, yet few people have suffered more.

Religious Persecution

The sufferings of the Baptists took three forms. The first was religious persecution. When the German Baptists arrived in Volhynia, they came Bible in hand. No sooner were they on scene than they gathered for worship and began to evangelize. They were extremely zealous. Most of them were recent converts who had come to a personal faith in Jesus Christ under Gottfried F. Alf, who is generally known as the father of Baptists in Poland. Alf, who made a number of missionary trips to Volhynia, suffered considerably himself. He was imprisoned some thirty times. The first Baptist church in Volhynia was established in Horstschick in 1864. A few days later, a second church was founded in Sorotschin, and the following year a church was pioneered in Neudorf.

The Baptist movement in Volhynia grew rapidly. By turn of century, there were close to 10,000 members, not counting children. Some of the churches were quite large. Neudorf, later considered the mother church because of its sheer size and influence, seated 2000 and had some 30 stations.

Initially much of the persecution came from the Lutheran church, as many of converts were originally Lutheran. This caused a considerable amount of hostility and resentment. On one occasion the Lutheran pastor from the village of Heimtal became so furious that he chained a "Baptist brother" to the man's doghouse. On

another occasion a woman who attended a communion service in a Baptist church was whipped by her husband when she returned, and then excommunicated by the Lutheran church. Often the outdoor baptismal services were disrupted, members were accused of preaching a false doctrine, converts were ridiculed, pastors were threatened and church buildings were destroyed.

The Baptists also faced persecution from the Orthodox Church. It was against the law to proselytize among those of the Orthodox faith. This became tricky if a member of the Orthodox Church voluntarily came to a worship service or Bible study on his own. Church officials resented it and were quick to report it to the local government authorities.

Finally, the Tsarist Government persecuted the Baptists as well. They often refused to give the Baptists permission to erect a church building and adamantly refused to allow them to open church schools. They were quick to threaten pastors with exile on the slightest provocation or infraction of the law. This came to a head in 1877 when three Baptist pastors and three laymen were arrested and deported from the country without a trial, without a bill of indictment and without even an opportunity to return to their homes to bid farewell to their families. It was a scandalous miscarriage of justice. Even the most notorious thieves and murderers in Russia were treated with greater respect and leniency than these Baptist preachers of the Gospel. It was eventually learned that a Lutheran schoolmaster who had been excluded from the Baptist church in Neudorf due to immoral behavior was behind it.

A few years later in 1892 Pastor F. A. Mueller from Lucinow was given twelve days to get his affairs in order before he and his wife were scheduled for banishment to Siberia. They secretly left Russia before the authorities could put their plan into action.

Why were they persecuted? There were a number of reasons. For one thing the Baptists threatened the membership of the other churches by their zealous outreach. The Baptists had as their motto, "Every Baptist a missionary." They also repudiated infant baptism, baptismal regeneration, unregenerate living, institutionalism, sacramentalism and icons, all established church doctrine and practice in Russia. This caused both the Lutheran and Orthodox members to question their pastor's teaching and the church's theology, often resulting in heated debates and humiliating confrontations.

Siberian Exile

The second form of suffering came about as a result of the Siberian exile. Granted the Baptists were not the only ones to be deported to the far reaches of the Russian Empire, but they were among the number. When World War I broke out the Germans were put under surveillance and accused of spying for the German government. It was totally untrue. Nevertheless the myth prevailed.

In Feb. 1915, the Russian passed a law in the Duma that all the land of the Germans was to expropriated. This apparently filtered down to the Germans, but few paid much attention to it. It was inconceivable. Most of them owned their land and many had become Russian citizens, including my own grandfather. Moreover they were law-abiding citizens and their sons served in the Russian army along with the Russian soldiers. Four months later they were deported to Siberia and Central Asia so they would not become German sympathizers.

Why were they deported? The underlying truth is that it was a pretext for getting rid of them as resentment against them had been building since 1890. The primary reason was that the German farmers were becoming stronger and stronger while the Russian peasants remained the same they were fifty years earlier. The Germans had nice homes, big farms, and much livestock. It is said that in those days they measured a man by the size of his manure pile. They had a saying, "The bigger the pile the better the man." Apparently the Germans had a lot of big piles of manure. As a result there was a considerable amount of envy and resentment and fear the Germans would get the upper hand and take over. At the same time, the Germans held the Russian peasants in ridicule. My father often said, "All they wanted to do was drink and dance." Others referred to them as "Die verruckta Russin" (The crazy Russians).

It was a lot like Pharoah and the Children of Israel in Egypt. In Exodus we read that the King said to his advisers: "Look, the Israelites have become too numerous for us. Come we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and if war breaks out, will join our enemies and fight against us" (Ex. 1: 18-10).

By 1915 there were about 200,000 Germans living in Volhynia. Suddenly, on June 15, 1915, the unexpected happened. Russian soldiers rode into town and announced to the people they had two weeks to get ready for their exile. It was just before the beginning of harvest season. The people protested. My grandfather filed a complaint against the government but it was of no avail. They were ordered at gunpoint to begin preparations immediately.

First the pastors, educators and leaders in the villages were arrested and put in prison so the people would be leaderless. It was based on the old adage, "Strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep." The farmers had no choice but to select their best horses, grease their wagons and prepare for their journey. Their destination was unknown.

My mother who was six years old at the time was part of that long trek. She said, "We were, I think, six weeks on the road. We had to walk all the time behind the wagon because the load was so heavy. We took along bedding and clothes and food. Some people even took along a cow. I don't remember if we did or not The wagons were covered. We had some furniture along too and a cedar chest.

There were quite a few of us as kids. We all sleep in the wagon under the covering. We were happy as kids. We thought we were going on a holiday. Mama was inside the house baking bread to take a long and crying. We didn't understand why.

"Later we found out the reason. We had some food along, mostly dried bread and canned fruited. Later we pulled stuff out of the gardens as we traveled, carrots and potatoes. Sometimes the people got mad but we had nothing to eat. There were long lines of wagons. The soldiers had guns and swords. They were very rough with us and got mad. Once when we had supper all ready on the grill, they came and made us throw everything out. 'Go, Go' they shouted and moved their swords at us from their horses."

The trip was merciless. Sickness was rampant and death was commonplace. There was no time to give loved ones a decent burial. Often a hole was simply dug by the side of the road and a stone or wooden marker erected and the family moved on. Children were born in the back of wagons and the aged were sometimes separated from the rest of the family.

People were sent to different places, most of them beyond the Volga. My family was fortunate in that they were allowed to settle in the region of Tula, south of Russia. They got jobs working for a wealthy Russian landowner in area. Pastors who were taken prior to the rest of the people were later allowed to join their families and to minister to the people and to start new churches.

In 1918 after the October Revolution the people were allowed to return to their homes, but only half made it. The rest died along way or in exile. The way back was difficult and dangerous. The Reds and Whites were fighting for control of Russia and the Germans were sometimes innocently caught up in the civil strife. When the Germans arrived back in Volhynia they discovered that much of their beloved homeland was in shambles. Their homes and churches had been taken over by Galicians. In some instances their land had been sold, but most of them got their land back again. In any case they had to virtually start all over again.

In addition there were outbreaks of various epidemics claiming the lives of some of the strongest. But most of all there was a scarcity of food and supplies. According to one pastor who returned with his people, "There was no cow, no horse, no wagon, no plow or harrows or even a horse harness to been seen anywhere." But as my mother said, "The Germans knew how to work. Soon we had more than the Russians again." The churches likewise were rebuilt and soon they again thrived with more than 10,000 members.

Communist Control

In the beginning there was a certain amount of religious freedom, but presently the Communist government began to exercise its control, which led to the third form of suffering.

At first in the early 1920s after things began to settle down the German colonists "began to breath easier." Some of them even thought that things would be better under Bolshevick rule than the Tsar. Then there were rumors of oppression from the Government. It was not unfounded. In April 1926 pastors of all denominations, Baptists as well, were required to register and religious activities were severely restricted and expressly forbidden. Special taxes were imposed which sometimes had to be raised on the spot. Waldemar A. Gutsche, a Baptist pastor and scholar in nearby Poland, called it "the cause of a sea of suffering and tears."

Next the farmers were attacked. The Government only gave them about one-third of the market value for their agricultural products. The farmers held back for which they were punished. Quotes were set and they were told they had to bring their grain and livestock to certain collection points. When the farmers refused to meet their required quotas the Government send soldiers to force them at gunpoint to bring in their produce, increased the quotes and imposed greater taxes. In less than two years, taxes rose ten-fold. This resulted in resistance, demonstrations and fights.

At this point many people saw the writing on the wall and immigrated to Canada, the United States and Brazil. My mother and father left for northern Alberta, Canada on January 5, 1927. Other family members followed. By the latter part of 1928, the borders were closed. It was a very frustrating time for the Government as the remaining farmers refused to budge. In January 1929, the Government announced a mass collectivization of the farms. At first they made it sound like it was voluntary. But if they didn't join they were threatened with recriminations. They were told they would be left out, fined and imprisoned. The farmer rose up in protest.

By December 1929, the Government took aggressive steps to eradicate the rich farmers who were called "kulaks". If they refused to join, they were arrested and deported to Siberia to work in labor camps, forestry, mining and construction. Some of my uncles were sent away and never returned. Others quietly slipped out at night, leaving everything behind, and disappeared in heavy forests and cities. My grandparents were among the latter group.

In a letter dated February 24, 1930, which my grandmother wrote to my father in Canada, she said, "Now let me tell you how it goes with us. It doesn't go so good. We have only one cow left, one calf, two sheep, four chickens and two horses and that, too, will soon be taken from us. They have laid so much on us to pay off

that we can't do it. Now they wrote everything up - horses, cow, calf, sheep, chickens, harrows, threshing machine, plough, sleigh, beds, cabinets, benches and so on. Only God knows how long we will still live in our buildings." Shortly after this they escaped to the primeval forest in Protowka where they hid themselves.

The Great Famine

About this time the Communist government started to arrest the pastors for so called "counter revolutionary activity," which included anything from preaching the Gospel and conducting a baptismal service to butchering a pig, having served in Czar's army and getting aid from Germany or Poland. Many were arrested and resettled to Siberia, which took another form of suffering.

Even so, the Government was frustrated. They couldn't arrest and deport the people fast enough and "there weren't enough bullets to shoot them all." They finally decided the only way to get rid of them was to starve them to death. With that an intense period of brutalization began, not only for the German Baptists, but for millions of Ukrainians. The "Great Famine" of 1932-33 was primarily a man-made effort orchestrated by Stalin to break the back of Ukraine. Borders seal off and nothing and no one could get in or out. They took away all food away from the people, sometimes grabbing it right out of hands of dying children.

The people resorted to raiding granaries on collective farms, eating birds, animals, leaves, roots, leather or anything they could get their hands on. Hoarding was absolutely forbidden. It was not uncommon for someone to get ten years of hard labor for hiding a few potatoes or to be shot on the spot. It is said that by the end of this period, which dragged on into 1934, there was not one bird or animal left in all of Ukraine. Pet dogs and cats were killed for food. Some people even resorted to eating their own dead loved ones. It was so bad that signs were posted by the Government saying, "Eating your children is an act of cannibalism."

The famine took a catastrophic toll on human life. It is estimated that eight to ten million people died of starvation during this period. Why? It was for no other reason than to wipe the Ukrainians off the face of history and expand the Russian Empire. But by and large the outside world knew nothing of this. Those who remained were "forbidden to write about such things." Worse yet, America and England looked the other way for political reasons. They were afraid that Germany might get too strong. They needed Russia as an ally. Not until seven or eight years ago did the truth finally come out, what our parents and grandparents had been telling us for years. Even then American television refused to run the reports, saying it was just so much nationalist propaganda. Others said, "Who the hell are these people anyway?" It finally broke when William F. Buckley took a chance and ran it on "Firing Line."

Stalin's reign of terror

In the meantime, false arrests continued on trumped up charges under Stalin's reign of terror, and again the Germans suffered. My uncle, Heinrich M. Mueller, a Baptist pastor, was arrested in 1934 for no other reason than he had received a charitable remittance from a pastor in Poland. He was sentenced to four years of hard labor helping to dig the Baltic Canal from the Volga River to Moscow. Ten percent of all the workers died annually in this hellhole. Miraculously he survived. When he returned he was re-arrested and shot at ten minutes after ten on the morning of November 21, 1937 and dumped in a mass grave outside Zhitomir. In another case, four "Baptist brothers," relatives of mine, were all arrested the same day and shot at the same time.

To be sure Baptists were not the only ones to be caught up in this suffering, but they were part of it. By 1933-34 all the Baptist churches in Volhynia were closed and one after another the pastors were picked off. Of the fifteen pastors who were still active in eastern Volhynia in 1935, nine were shot, several simply disappeared and only two died a natural death after serving time in a Gulag. It is said that the "Trioka," where three men had the absolute power to decide the fate of a man, without the benefit of a trial or indictment, was among the most inhumane.

On June 22, 1941, Hitler invaded Russia. For two years, the Germans Baptists in Ukraine treated were treated with dignity and respect. During this time some of the churches were reopened. Then in October the German Army retreated and the remaining Germans went with them on trains, army trucks and horse drawn vehicles.

When the people arrived in Germany they thought they were finally home and could start over again. But after the war, they were put on trains, shipped to Siberia and told they could never return to their place of birth in Russia again. It is estimated that two million Germans were forced to stay in Russia. In recent years, about 1 ½ million have returned to Germany, some members of my own family among them.

Such is the suffering of the German Baptists in Volhynia, Russia. But to their eternal credit it must be said that they did not simply suffer; they triumphed. Interestingly, they have never in all of their history played the part of the victim or sought revenge. On the contrary, they have always remembered the sufferings of others. During the "Great Famine" and World War II they sent food and clothing parcels to the poor and hungry and after the war they sponsored displaced persons, again my family among them. Since then many descendents of these staunch pilgrims of faith have returned to their "Heimat" (home land) offering humanitarian aid, theological education and evangelistic outreach. They have also been among the most charitable financial givers of any people. Thousands of dollars are invested each year in helping others to help themselves.

In addition, they have formed the backbone of the German Baptists (now North American Baptist Conference) in western Canada and various parts of the United States. Many of the sons and daughters of these immigrants have become pastors, educators and missionaries.

In 1993 Good Samaritan Ministries, a Christian humanitarian effort was established in Ukraine when I met a woman in the Zhitomir Hotel by the name of Galina Bidenko. Our mission is "to help the helpless, especially widows and orphans" and "to train and empower nationals to help themselves and others." Since then, the work has grown to include many more centers and ministries in the formerly German Baptist villages. Each year the "Mission" sends volunteers, doctors, dentists, counselors, pastors and a support team to offer practical aid to the Ukrainians.

Often those who are abused become abusers. Not so with the German Baptists. Many of those who volunteer are the children and grandchildren of the very Baptists who suffered at the hands of the Russians. This is their triumph!