

## **A Confirmation in Soviet Russia**

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[Translator's Note: A young man attends his confirmation rite in spite of the possibility that he could lose his job. Square brackets indicate translator's note.]

[Begin Translation]

### **A Confirmation in Soviet Russia**

A true story from the year 1935.

As told by the wife of Pastor Joh. Kludt, from Korntal

Bernhard X. was the son of a German who was a big farmer in South Russia by the Black Sea. His grandfather was himself one who emigrated from Germany to Russia and had the benefit of attending a good school in Germany. Bernhard's father lived on the farmyard of his grandfather, but in a private house along with his brave wife and his 6 dear children. They enjoyed their wealth, but also did not forget those around them who had less, yes, even the Russians, who, when they came knocking at the door, never went away empty, but always found help and a kind word.

Then Bolshevism came into the country. Farmland was taken away from the farmers and nationalized. Furthermore, whoever wanted to farm, no matter how much he had before, got assigned to him a hectare per family member in the lease. But all supplies of grain were requisitioned and hauled off. Only 1 *Pud* (=40 Russian pounds [36.11 lbs/16.38kg]) per month, per head, was given back. This was supposed to and had to last until the next harvest. It might just be that it turned out to be enough. However, on the Volga, after everything was taken from them and carried off, a very severe crop failure occurred. As a result, countless Volga Germans found themselves forced to leave their home in a lurch and they embarked on a wandering in southern Russia, a place known as the breadbasket of Russia. Whoever owned a horse, hitched it to a wagon, seated his wife and child on it and took the last of his food with him. Those who had no horse anymore made their way down the road on foot. Many refugees died along the way and others arrived at their destination even if after weeks of travel. They pitched their tents in the vicinity of German colonies and stayed there as long as the German settlers had the need of assistance to salvage their harvest on what land still belonged to them, daily sending their children into the village for bread. But once the autumn rains started and the poor refugees started to get sick due to hunger, dampness, cold and lack of clothing, the refugees then came to the farmers in the south and asked that they take them in and allow them to stay in their summer living quarters, summer kitchens and granaries. And the people took pity on them and took them in for the Savior's sake. They provided them with a roof over their heads and bread even though

the harvest in the south was not all that good either. But the famine had already weakened so many of the refugees so that they could no longer overcome the cool and one refugee after another succumbed to his sufferings, even many of the resident farmers, and a lot of deaths took place such as the settlers had never experienced before. Soon the train cars were so contaminated by the travelling refugees that when a person had to make a trip, he had to ask himself, "Will I still come back home healthy?" Bernhard's father had to make a trip to the next town. He came back home sick. Many days passed, mixed with fear and hope, but eventually he finally closed his eyes forever and his mourning family stood by his coffin. The grandparents and aunts faithfully took in the widow and orphans. The grandfather especially commented, "The schools are without religion, and it is questionable whether my grandchildren will ever experience proper confirmation instructions." So he took it upon himself to instruct them in Luther's Catechism as often as he had free time. The children eagerly learned passages and hymns and, yes, the grandfather also said, "If things happen in your lives where you have to decide between God's Word or man's word, then they must obey God rather than man."

But the grandfather was not so young anymore. He had already experienced 76 winters and the great famine and many deaths of his countrymen were heavy on his heart. One afternoon, tired from working the hay, he sat down by a haystack to rest and fell asleep. He awoke with chest pains. He got pneumonia and, when, after a few days, his wife asked him, "What should I do with the grandchildren?" he replied calm and composed, "As becomes a Christian. When I recover, I will take care of everything as much as possible. The rest we have to leave up to God." He died and once again the whole family stood at the coffin mourning, although not mourning as those who have no hope. Weeks went by. Each week brought another new regulations from the government. When the land was also taken away from the Germans, they at least still had their houses, their fruit orchards and vegetable gardens. During that time, an educated German woman from a big city in Russia approached the pastor's wife of the church parish where Bernhard's mother lived with a modest request if there might be someone in the south who would be willing to take in her and her little son for a few weeks so that she could relax a bit. She did not have any money to pay for her keep, but did have a good job prospect and would make good for it later on. The pastor's wife turned to Bernhard's mother and aunts and, now look at that, they agreed. Although she had just buried her mother and was harnessed now with the upbringing of the children, she definitely believed that God had sent this woman to her and did not want to refuse. The woman came and stayed and recovered rapidly in the friendly and religious environment and, after some time, returned to her home and took up her position.

Again, weeks passed and suddenly Bernhard's mother and aunt had to give up their houses and move to some other strange place. But to where? Then the woman who had stayed with Bernhard's mother wrote to say that she and her 6 children should come to her place because she wanted to provide them with accommodations. And now Bernhard's mother has been living with that woman for some time. The older children are working as undocumented workers and earn bread for themselves, the mother and the smaller brothers and sisters.

Throughout Soviet Russia, there are only a few Lutheran pastors who are still in office. All the others are either dead, emigrated or shipped off. In the city, in the vicinity where Bernhard and his mother are living, there is also one of the few remaining pastors. He had announced that

there would be confirmation instruction and, since Bernhard had arrived at his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he had the right to sign up for it. Confirmation instruction was set by the pastor for Sunday evening because, in Soviet Russia, Sundays are also work-days and most confirmation students are at work throughout the day. Bernhard was very happy on that evening. He had asked his younger brother to bring to the city train station his confirmation clothing (a pair of trousers, which he had gotten with great effort through the wages he earned and a black shirt belonging to his grandfather). To Bernhard, the hours at work seemed to go by especially slow that day, but finally they also came to an end. How happy he was at the thought of the solemn occasion which stood before him. But suddenly, the door of the building where Bernhard worked opened and in stepped a supervisor and announced in a rough tone, "It is an order from the authorities that all workers are to stay for the night shift." He announced it and was on his way. But Bernhard did not consult with flesh and blood, nor with his comrades, because it was at this moment that he believed was the moment where the words of his grandfather applied: "One has to listen to God more than to men." He grabbed his hat and ran to the train station in the suburb. It did not take long and he was at the city's main train station. There stood his brother already with the bundle of clothing. "Thanks a lot" he said to him and hurried into the train station restroom where he washed himself with the soap that his brother had brought along and changed his clothing. Eventually, the thought came to him: "What if because of my disobedience I lose my position tomorrow and along with it my job? What will my mother do then? And if I am dismissed from my position, would anyone else hire me?" But he did not trouble himself to think much on this and, after he was dressed, he rushed to the streetcar, but...Oh my!...It had just left and would not return for another half hour. He saw that nothing else remained for him but to run, as fast as his feet would carry him, if he wanted to be at the church by 8:00 PM, and he ran and ran, without stopping and resting. From a distance he already could hear the sound of the organ. They were singing the opening hymn. As he entered the church, the organist was holding on to the final chord. As it got quieter and quieter, Bernhard's fluttering heart calmed down along with the sound of the organ as he briskly walked down the aisle of the church and took his place by the youth gathered around the altar, their faces focused intently on their soul provider (*Seelsorger*). After that, everything got quiet and from the altar came the loud and distinct sound: "Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ," and peace also returned to Bernhard's poor heart. As the pastor (*Seelsorger*) now admonished the young folks to stay close to their Lord and Shepherd and follow His voice, things also got calm in Bernhard's heart. And as the question arose then and there within himself: "What will mother do if I were to be dismissed from my job tomorrow?" there came another voice from within, "Your Father in heaven knows what you need and will take care of you just as He has done up to now." After an address by the pastor, he asked the youth whether it was their sincere intent to remain true to their God and His word, and they all answered the question with one powerful "Yes" and the pastor, after a brief pause, said, "The Lord has heard it" and with that received them into the congregation of the faithful and asked God that He give them the power to keep their promise. After that, they all sang the stanza, "Strengthen us, Mediator, we are Yours" and they kneeled and, with the laying on of hands, received the blessing of the Triune God with the words: "Receive the Holy Spirit, protection and a shield from all evil, power and strength for all that is good through the gracious hand of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Each confirmand also received a special scripture verse for his life and with the hymn "Take Thou my hand and lead me" the solemn ceremony came to an end. During the festive sounds of the organ, the youth left the church. The mother was waiting with longing for her son at the house. They ate a simple

evening meal and Bernhard quickly went off to bed, because the next morning he had to get up real early to show up at his place of work. Now the question came back to him again—what was he going to do if they dismissed him—but he was at peace within because he had done what his conscience had told him.

Arriving at the work place, he quietly took up his work and saw that no one said one little word to him about his failure to be present at the night shift. When he returned to the house, he sunk to his mother's neck and called out, "Mother, mother, God did a miracle today, even in Soviet Russia, where most no longer believe in Him. "Yes, of course," the mother replied convincingly, "We only have to have the eyes to recognize them."

29 August, 1939

[End of Translation]