

## Biographical Report on Pastor Johannes Alber

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Translated by Allen E. Konrad – January 2013  
PO Box 157 Rowley, IA 52329  
<onamission@lbt.org>

[Translator's Note: Lutheran Pastor Johannes Alber (1845-1932), born in Nikolayev and served in Worms and Grossliebental, Kherson/Odessa. Comments in square brackets are those of the translator.]

[Begin Translation]

### **Pastor Johannes Alber died 02 September, 1932 in Pfullingen**

[End of article indicates he died 30 September and was buried 02 October

Concerning the life of this man, one can with full right use the words from Psalm 92, which a friend in Pfullingen cited in the community newspaper: “Those that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God, and they shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be fruitful and flourishing; to show that the Lord is upright, he is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.”

That was the testimony of his life's work for his Lord through word and conduct until the end.

Johannes Alber was born on 20 October, 1845, in the city of Nikolayev, in South Russia. His father was an accomplished wagon maker. His grandfather emigrated from Plieningen on the Filder [about 10km south of Stuttgart] for the sake of the faith. A pious religious sense also prevailed in the house of his children, which the deceased described in his notes, that “a devotional hour” (*Stunde*) was held on Sunday afternoon and also in the evening in his parental home, his father himself conducting the activities. It was like that also in the house of his uncle in Odessa, where the deceased came in his younger years to attend secondary school (*Gymnasium*). It was in these *Stunden* that the maturing young man received many good impressions, as he himself writes, and there grew in him the desire to become a worker in the vineyard of the Lord. He was happy when his father allowed him to study theology. After he had finished his secondary school, he first attended the mission seminary in Barmen, and after a brief stay, transferred to the University of Tübingen to study theology there. Professor Beck made a deep impression on him during that time and he spoke highly of and often quoted him. After completing his studies, he was called to be the pastor in the community of Worms, in South Russia. He worked here for not quite five years. During this period of time, he got married to Christiane Strubel of Winnenden, who was his faithful life's companion for over 50 years.

In 1876, the village of Grossliebental, near Odessa, called the now gone home (*Heimgangenen*) pastor where he was able to work for 42 years. Here was his real life's work, and also the desire of his heart, which he already cherished at the beginning of his ministry, to be able to do something meaningful for the benefit of the sick, poor, orphans and similar needy persons.

He himself writes: "After I got settled down fairly well in the community, I got to thinking in the back of my mind about establishing an institute of mercy. To my great delight, I immediately found an interest for such a thought. Yes, not only that, but someone even showed me the place in the community where the place for such a house was already designated. So the Lord provided a way for his servant before he made known out loud his desire. And so the Lord blessed his undertakings so that, one after the other, the Institute "Bethany" for the aged, crippled, epileptic and feeble-minded; an orphanage and a hospital got started. At first, he obtained the nurses (*Schwestern*) that were required from the neighboring Diaconate House "Sarata" in Bessarabia, but then things soon developed where he trained his own nurses so that, along with the Institute, he also joined a small Diaconate House to it which could meet the demand for nurses. His institutions were very close to the heart of this conscientious man and seldom did a day go by where one did not see him in either this or that house. The orphanage was especially his favorite place to stop by and the children were so trusting of him that they already started running toward him when they saw him coming from a distance. The three children which God had blessed the couple with, He soon took back to Himself to the great sorrow of the parents, especially the father, who was such an outspoken friend of children. All the more now he took on, in his fatherly heart, the children of strangers.

With great pleasure, he put together the devotions for the institutions, which the busy man could rarely conduct on his own. Since he was quite musical, he accompanied most of the songs with the accordion (*Harmonium*) and usually allowed for a lot of singing. One of his favorite songs was the one by D. Rappard: "The bride has tarried so long already, O Lord, for your appearance" (*Es hart die Braut so lange schon, o Herr auf Dein Erscheinen*) where every verse ends with the refrain: "Oh, come soon Lord Jesus!" (*Ach komme bald Herr Jesu!*) How many times this calling of his has shown up in the letters of his former nurses and how often mention of him will be lifted up before God, but unheard by others.

Another important work of the deceased which he was involved in within his congregation was the instruction of religion in the central school located there, where future teachers and other community officials were trained. A former student, Dr. S., living in Bessarabia, writes: "We gladly sat at his feet as students, he understood how to win our heart. We felt: It was inner conviction that he gave us, it was living instruction, not dead intellectual stuff." This same man, who resided in a neighboring community of Grossliebental further writes: "His worship services were gladly attended, he spoke straightforward, simply, but convincingly.

His surrounding communities always rejoiced at his coming, those attending church appreciated his preaching, the young men and women, the instruction of the children, the community people at his visit to their gatherings, the sick for his total comforting words.

So the deceased leaves behind traces of blessings everywhere. In addition to the tasks the one who has departed into eternity already had, he received a further one during the second half of his time in office—he was elected by his brothers in the ministry to become the first Provost in South Russia. The Provost District that he was appointed to was comprised of approximately 13 large parishes in the Black Sea region and in Bessarabia. A lot of work was connected with this office and especially much traveling. But through his mild and Christ-like charming personality (*Weitherzigkeit*), in the best sense of the word, he gained the hard-earned trust of his brothers in the ministry and it made his work easier.

But finally the time came for the active man, who was exhausted and wanted to take up his retirement in Württemberg, the land of his fathers. He was granted his retirement by the Evangelical Lutheran Consistory in Petersburg at the age of 68. But God decided something else for him because just three days before the day of his retirement, the World War broke out and it was no longer possible for him to travel. The church body asked him not to leave them during these difficult times and the Consistory gave him an official call to take up his previous position again. So he stayed in this new assignment, but received an assistant in the office, Pastor A. Koch, who later became his successor.

The war time with its emotions, hardships and oppressions, which the German colonists mostly got to experience, where they were considered and treated as foreigners, yes even enemies of the Russian Empire, was a heavy load for the sensitive mind of the one who has now gone into eternity. But from another perspective, the days that transpired were a blessing for the church by his staying. His intercession and advocacy with the higher authorities were many, difficult, with unjust penalties, carried out on his own behalf or also for a whole community. The community of Grossliebental, because it was a border district, was particularly harshly guarded, experienced military billeting, which led to all kinds of abuses. Due to the usual friendly and dignified behavior of the pastor it often served to calm tempers.

1917 came and along with it the overthrow. New difficulties entered, also especially for the leading personalities in the communities. The subversive element was not content with the fall of the government and soon the first signs of a storm of the approaching Bolshevism revealed itself, which is today every increasingly plunging Russia into ruin. Through the speedy intervention of the German and Austrian military, expanding Bolshevism was blocked, but one still felt that the impending disaster and our departed brother increasingly longed for the German homeland where he and his wife hoped to find their place of retirement. Unexpectedly, quickly a path was opened for him through a visit by Commander-in-Chief of the German occupation forces, Count Waldersee, who arranged with Württemberg's King Wilhelm II for approval for him to come to Württemberg. The farewell from the community was painful and full of tears from both sides, but no one dared to hold back any more this faithful man. Unfortunately, he found things different in Germany than what he had hoped and looked forward to, because shortly after his arrival there in September of 1918, there were echoes of times similar to what he had been experiencing in Russia. That brought him great sorrow. Living conditions were also a heavy burden and he had to wait quite a while until he was able to say with the Psalmist: "The bird has found a house and the swallow her nest." The couple finally found a home in Pfullingen [just SE of Reutlingen/Württemberg city limits] with relatives of his wife. It was in this place

that they were able to celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary on 17 February, 1924. Soon after, in October of the same year, his faithful life's partner was taken from his side by a stroke.

As the deceased, during the time while his wife was alive, continued to visit the sick and the poor people in Pfullingen, so he now, in his loneliness, devoted himself to this same work, so much so that city Pastor Walcher, who buried him, was able to say at his grave, "He was one of ours, not only because he spent his last years in our midst and loved us, but more so because he lived with us and that he lived for us, that he gave of his strength and gifts in the service of our community."

But a heavy oppressive concern weighed more and more on the mind of the one who has gone to sleep—the concern about his people back in Russia, especially those in his old congregation who were going through the most difficult struggle of their faith in years. The caretaker of souls had been taken away from them and imprisoned and so everything was going to be destroyed that the one who has now gone home had built up during his time in office. So for him it was priestly loyal intercession, day and night, on their behalf; but he also cared for them, as long as he was able, by making requests for material support, especially for those who had migrated to America.

The Lord put him on a sick-bed in the spring of last year, from which he should not again get back up from. Intestinal paralysis (*Darmlähmung*), which caused him much discomfort, set in and quickly drained his strength. How he longed to be taken home! He confidently put all his cares, all his suffering into God's hands, entrusting them to Him and that He would see to things in Russia also.

Finally, on 30 September of this same year, the Lord took the weary pilgrim home at the age of nearly 87. His earthly shell was laid to rest on a bright and beautiful autumn Sunday on 02 October. A large crowd followed the hearse. One could observe the general participation and appreciation for the one who had fallen asleep. It also rang out through the speech of the clergy at the grave in the words of old man Simeon: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, as you have said, for my eyes have seen your Savior." He carried out his work as a servant of the Lord, which is what the one now fallen asleep had also done, who looked to his Savior and lived and found peace in Him.

How fitting also was the hymn, "The Pilgrim from Afar" (*Der Pilger aus der Ferne*), that the brass band played as the hearse approached the grave of the one who had now gone home, especially the last verses which were ever more in agreement with his spirit.

One who from the virgin honey  
Of eternity tastes,  
The pilgrim is at home,  
Only when the grave covers him.

*Wer von dem Honigseime  
Der Ewigkeit geschmeckt,  
Der Pilger ist daheime,  
Nur wenn das Grab ihn deckt.*

That's why there also wakes in him here below  
Homesickness early and late,  
Up there he searches for peace,  
To which place his yearning goes.

*D'rum weckt ihn auch hinieden  
Das Heimweh frueh und spaet,  
Er sucht dort oben Frieden,  
Wohin sein Sehnen geht.*

Yes, the homesick longing soul is now at home forever!

Written by Miss Anna Schrenk, Korntal, early 1933,

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[End of Translation]