

Experience in a Lutheran Parsonage in Russia

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[Translator's Note: A report by the daughter of a pastor who experienced the turmoil of the Bolshevik Revolution and World War 2 while living in the colonies of Hoffnungstal and Glückstal in Kherson/Odessa. Square brackets indicate translator's note.]

[Begin Translation]

My Experience in a Lutheran Parsonage in Russia

My experiences stretch out over many years when our dear father was active as pastor in Russia for 45 years—19 years in the Trans-Caucasia, 22 years in the Odessa provost district within the colony of Glückstal, and then 4 more years as house chaplain in the mercy institution of Rev. Provost [Johannes] Alber, who was no longer able to carry out the duties of the office in the large parish because he did not have sufficient strength. At this last position, my father attained the age of 75, a tired and sick man, and returned to the German homeland where I was able to care for him for another three years until he was able to enter the rest of God's people in November of 1911.

After his death, I returned to Russia in the Spring of 1912, responding to a call from young pastor W[inkler, Immanuel] in the Odessa District colony of Hoffnungstal. He was still single and had two younger sisters living with him. I was supposed to take the acting role of mother in the parsonage and act like a pastor's wife in the congregation. I had been doing that for many years in the congregations of my father since our dear mother had already died in 1892.

The first years of my stay in Hoffnungstal went by in quiet, peaceful work, as I was accustomed to from earlier times. Then came 1914 and the World War and this created a completely different situation. With it began the ordeal for the German colonist in Russia and so also for the Lutheran parsonage. Initially, it was primarily the congregations and parsonages in the west and the southwest of the empire who were at risk because they very soon came to be in the war zone. There were probably no afflictions which one had to endure due to the faith, but rather for the sake of Germanness. Suddenly, one saw the Germans, with whom one had earlier been living with in peace and harmony, become the enemies and traitors of the country. Although the German sons and also many family fathers pledged their loyalty, without grumbling, in the war, it is, without a doubt, also known to me that no one became a deserter or a traitor, but with heavy hearts they deployed, to that I can testify. However, things went against the German brothers, against the German motherland, to which the German colonists were still associated with, although they did not know it—or maybe only a few of them—and notwithstanding, that the German motherland had never shown any interest in their sons scattered in Russia. As soon as a new call-up was issued, a worship service was held with Holy Communion, and this worship

service was always very moving. As time went by, they were banned, as even later the German sermons were definitely forbidden, and the pastors helped to put together appropriate Bible texts and then read them. Then, in between them, suitable verses were sung. These worship services were also well attended and brought special blessings as one was led fittingly in the Bible. This prohibition did not yet exist in the first couple of years of the war. It was forbidden to speak German out on the street, with a fine of 3,000 ruble (at that time some 6,000 Reich Marks), or three months in jail. Since we were a closed German settlement, one could avoid this without a fine, but it often happened that the local patrolling officials caught someone while speaking German. Then a report was written up from which people could most often buy their way out either with money or food. I am aware of a case where one of the leading men in the village, since it was beneath his dignity to buy his way out, chose to go to jail. Young Pastor W[inkler, Immanuel] was called to serve as field chaplain in 1915, but returned again after a half year because he could not quite hide his German sentiments from the officers of the military administration. But it was not quite a year later when he got a night (this was always taken care of at night) expulsion order due to his "German phobia" attitude. And not he only, but also all of those in our house, a female teacher from the Baltic who was with us as a retired person, also the community nurse and the student ministerial candidate (*Probejahrskandidat*) [Friedrich] Merz. He and the two had 48 hours to get out of the village and move a 100km to the east. Only I, who was probably the most German, because I had grown up in Germany and was educated there, was excluded from the decree. It is still a miracle for me today how God protected me from all the danger I was exposed to throughout the whole time of the war. "Did not God spread out his gracious wings over me during all that distress!"

Through the intercession of a high official in Odessa, the expulsion order was rescinded. However, a few months later, shortly after Pastor W[inkler, Immanuel] got married, he received another expulsion order and this time he had to leave and soon after his young wife also. They and many others, most of them Baltic pastors in the east, stayed in the city of Saratov. But later, Pastor W[inkler, Immanuel] was allowed to go to Kharkov and settle down there.

I now left the housekeeping in Hoffnungstal and moved on to Grossliebental, where I had earlier already worked in the mercy hospital, and where Provost Alber was waiting for me.

Then began the most difficult time for me. It was in the Summer of 1916 when I moved and Odessa and the surrounding area had already become a border area (*Grenzgebiet*). The military was always around, a person was always under guard and observed and this was the time that preaching was forbidden. Provost Alber, who himself was already retired, but still always active in office, had, at that time, young Pastor K[och, Albert] working as assistant, who then ended up becoming his successor.

It was on Christmas Eve of 1916 that an entire regiment of reservists from the Eastern Province (*Gouvernements*) came through Grossliebental on a forced march to the Romanian Front. The poor people were dead tired and many dropped on the soggy streets because they were unable to go any farther. That night, every home had accommodate them, some as many as 50-60 men. Even we in the parsonage had several men who were from Siberia. Oh how sorry I was for these men who were being led just like sheep to the slaughter.

That was our Christmas of 1916. In February came the overthrow of the government (*Umsturz*). At first, a person became paralyzed when it was announced, “The Tsar is dethroned.” The man who was, up to that time, in Russia, venerated almost as a god. For a few months, while the Kerensky government was at the helm, a person lived in relative quiet, but the hope that this would be the end of a terrible war did not come to pass. The external war came to an end and so began an internal one which brought about the first Bolshevik government. Soon there were street battles in and around Odessa, between the Ukrainians and the Bolsheviks, until the Bolsheviks finally gained the victory. Then began the time of the Bolshevik agitation.

We had two deep-cutting experiences, both during the time of the Tsarist government and the Kerensky government. The first was the Congress of Black Sea Germans held in Odessa where representative from all the colonist districts of the south were gathered and the so-called “liquidation order” was presented to them, signed by the Tsar himself. Before the vote was taken, the German colonists had this put before them—that they stop considering themselves as German and also convert to the Russian Orthodox Church, or leave Russia “as poor as they were when they first arrive” and also without any compensation. They declared unanimously, “We would rather leave this country poor than to deny our German heritage and our confession of faith.”

The second incident took place during the time of the Kerensky government, if memory serves me correctly. Serbian officers were stationed in Grossliebental, who were supposed to form a new regiment for the Russian-Romanian Front made up mostly of Czechs who were Austrian prisoners of war. There is much to be said about what atrocities were committed on these poor prisoners of war, who were now also to swear allegiance to Russia. I do not want to get too much into this, but want to especially tell about one incident which affected the parsonage. One evening, a Serbian officer was assassinated. The Germans got the blame and the day came when the General Governor issued a command that everyone in Grossliebental had to leave within 48 hours and all residents were to be sent into an eastern province, I believe it was into the Ural Mountains. This situation now created a serious emergency. The community leaders now implored the two pastors to make intercessory prayer concerning the General Governor, that this decree be rescinded. After the gentlemen had gained strength through prayer, they embarked on a trip to Odessa, in full official garb—something which still had appeal in Russia—appeared before the high officials and presented their intercession on behalf of the community. At first, he was quite ungracious, but then became more friendly to the idea of the old Provost and finally promised that the decree would be rescinded on the condition that the community discover within a week who the perpetrators were. With the help of God, it turned out to be one of the Czech soldiers, and so a disaster was averted. But there were many such incidents and the sword always hung over the community and also over the parsonage.

Things did not get any better because in the Fall of 1917, the Bolshevik Regiment began to spread out. At first, there were only single raids taking place which left the colony in constant fear, so much so that a 60 man guard had to stand watch each night at the entrances to the village. These raids also especially affected the parsonage so much so that there was not an evening where one knew whether he would still be alive the next morning. But God watched over us and did not allow anything to happen to us. However, in time, the Bolsheviks

established themselves firmly in the village. They put up their red flag on the community administration building and on the hospital and, with that, we were in their hands.

One of their first actions was to murder the members of the middle class (*Bourgeoisie*) in Odessa and the surrounding area. Since they had already killed all the Tsarist officers, in so far as they did not defect to them, the frightened population of Odessa approached the German military by telegram with a request for help. On the day before the planned Bartholomew night (*Bartholomäusnacht*), a detachment of German and Austrian soldiers arrive in the city and also in our village. This resulted in a lifting up of cheers and hot prayers of thanks to God. The Reds immediately disappeared and we were once again able to breath freely and Odessa was occupied by the German military. This took place in March of 1918.

Now came some nice quiet months for us where we got visits in the parsonage, now and again, from the High German Military personnel which always produced great joy. So there was this day in August when Count Waldersee, Commander-in-Chief of the Occupation Army, also came. He and his two staff officers ate the noon meals with us in the parsonage. Now Provost [Johannes] Alber brought up a request as to whether it would be possible for him to arrange for us an entry permit into Germany. The honorable gentleman received the request favorably and promised us, the Provost, his wife and myself, that permission would be granted from his friend, the king of Württemberg, within two weeks. After only 12 days, the permission was in Odessa and the military authorities immediately gave us notice that we should get ready to travel within three days because we would be joining a German military train until it crossed over the German border. So we left Odessa in the last days of September, 1918, with happy and grateful hearts, along with 60 young colonist sons who had volunteered, of their own free will, for the Western Front.

I left the place, of course, in the hope that, when the turmoil of the war was over, I would be able to return again to my workplace in Grossliebental. But it turned out differently. I thank my God today that He brought me out of that country at the right time, which has become a hell for many of my fellow-countrymen. With aching heart, I remember them and ask God that He might strengthen and keep them in the faith.

(A report written by Miss A. Schrein, Korntal, 1935, for the Martin Luther Alliance, after the decision and request of the *Bücheburger Tagung*)

[End of Translation]