

Notes from the Edge of the World

Rev. Matthew Heise

December 2009

Below: Path to the seminary in Koltushi, Russia



Advent comes to Russia

“The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” I love to meditate upon verses like these from Matthew 4:16 during the dark months that begin all too early this time of the year in northern Russia. I was teaching two courses at the Lutheran seminary in November (about 10 kilometers to the east of St. Petersburg) and darkness certainly was the rule there. Sleep at night becomes more complicated, ironically, because the all-pervasive darkness makes it difficult to separate day from night. (You can see from the picture on the left that sometimes the snow helps preserve the light—although all that snow soon melted away).

As I begin to research the topic which I hope will become my doctoral dissertation, the closing of the Russian Lutheran churches in the 1930s, the phrase “the land of the shadow of death” is all too appropriate a metaphor for Russian life in the 20th century. But with the coming of Advent we focus once again upon light, although not as the pagans do. Our focus is upon the Light of the World—Jesus Christ. While with the Father and the Holy Spirit He is the Creator of light itself, it is His light of the Gospel that emboldens us. That Light shines forth in the everyday service to their people that we see from our church

partners, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia. Amidst the barren spiritual landscape I can clearly hear the words of the classic Advent hymn, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus:

**Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.**



Above: Me and Rev. Gabor Roszik on the seminary grounds

Jó napot kívánok?

On November 9, Europe celebrated the events of 20 years ago, when the Berlin Wall fell. I remembered back to late August of that year when I was at my father’s cousin’s house in an East German village (Langenleuba Niederhain- ja, Germans love long words!). At that time we had no inkling of how dramatically the world would change within a few months. The son-in-law of my Dad’s cousin wasn’t too sure about me, either. It might have been due to the fact that I was photographing their village home from every conceivable angle and looking every bit the Stasi spy that he thought I was. Fortunately Cousin Selma, having heard from West German relatives that I might show up, shouted out, “No, no, he has the family dimple!” Ah, yes, the family dimple rescued me on this occasion.

Well, I’m reflecting on those days because as I was teaching at the Lutheran seminary in Russia during November, I had the chance to become acquainted with Rev. Gabor Roszik of Hungary. Gabor was there brushing up on his Russian and expanding his work

with Prison Fellowship Ministries. (If your Hungarian is as good as mine, which is, relatively speaking, not much, then you should know that “Jó napot kívánok?” means “Good day, how are you?”).

One year before those historic events of 1989, Rev. Roszik was among the first democrats who challenged the dominance of the Communist Party and was overwhelmingly elected to the Hungarian Parliament from his hometown of Gödello. Within a year it became clear that the new democratic reality in Hungary and Eastern Europe was there to stay. Since East Germany and Hungary played a major role in the immediate events that led to the fall of the wall, I have always been especially proud of my ethnic roots in those countries. Hungary had decided to let East German tourists travel into Austria by taking down the barbed wire that separated the Iron Curtain at that time. East Germans subsequently flooded into Austria in great numbers and the events that led to the fall of the wall were soon set into fast forward.

Gabor talked to me about those times and how he had always feared and despised the Soviet Union. But a meeting with renowned Evangelical leader Charles Colson ultimately led him away from politics and into prison ministry. (Gabor is mentioned in Colson’s book *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*). When he started to expand this work into Russia, he found the people to be very friendly. Gabor put aside his old stereotypes of Russians and began to connect to other Christians and his fellow Lutherans, especially in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria. He is a good example of how the Ingrian church is making connections with various Lutherans in eastern and central Europe today. We pray that Gabor’s work will prove fruitful in Russia and especially among our church partners in Ingria.

Below: Ordination of Anatoly Pogasiy and Slava Abdullin-Bishop Kugappi is in the middle



Ordination of Slava Abdullin

While in the vicinity of St. Petersburg, I had the great joy to see my former student, Slava Abdullin, ordained as a pastor by Bishop Aari Kugappi. Many of you may recall that Slava is a former pagan from the Mari people, who reverence trees in their worship. It was wonderful to be a part of this great celebration. Likewise Anatoly

Pogasiy of St. Andrew’s Lutheran in Kazan was ordained. We pray that the Lord will bless their outreach to unbelievers and the Mari people. I can think of no better way to lead into wishing all of you God’s blessings and a merry Christmas! Thank you for your never-ending prayers and support!

Prayer Requests:

A most important prayer request! - Please pray for our seminary student Boris Churpov. Boris suffers from HIV/AIDS and is currently in the hospital. The prognosis does not look good at this moment. Please pray for his healing but especially for the Lord's presence if these are indeed his last days on this earth.

Thank the Lord with me that he has blessed my teaching and retention of the Russian language in my courses.

Pray for safe upcoming safe journeys: For me and Rev. Jim Bloker to Georgia—me this week and Rev. Bloker on the 12th of December.

Pray also for our safe flight back to Prague on December 17 and my subsequent trip back to the States for classes in early January. Because of the early class in January, I'll get a Michigan Christmas, if not a white one!

E-mail: matveih@yahoo.com --- Mailing address --- Evangelical Lutheran Ministries; Attn: Matthew Heise, International Post Office, Box 76; 37 Varshavskoye Shosse; 104000 Moscow, RUSSIA. To support my work financially, you can send a tax-deductible gift to: LCMS World Mission, 1333 S. Kirkwood Rd., St. Louis, MO 63122-7295. Make checks payable to LCMS World Mission. Mark checks "Support of Matthew Heise." If you would like to partner with me in my ministry with ongoing support as an individual or congregation, please contact Debra Feenstra for information on Together in Mission or Mission Senders at 1-800-248-1930 Ext. 1651 or Debra.Feenstra@lcms.org Thank you and God bless you!