

Distinctly German: The Seventh-day Adventist Church's Beginnings in Ukraine

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The late nineteenth century in Russia and the Ukraine was a period marked by instability, famine, and political issues. However, it was also the beginning of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's presence in that region of the world. During the late 1800s, the individuals being baptized into the Adventist faith were not native Ukrainians or even Russians. Instead, the first converts to Seventh-day Adventism were German. In the late 1700s at the invitation of Catherine the Great, thousands of Germans had migrated to Russia, which included modern-day Ukraine. Establishing settlements, these Germans from Russia, as they were later termed, enjoyed exemption from military service and religious freedom that the Russian tsarina had given them. Forming enclaves of German culture and language, the descendants of the original settlers were the first to accept the Adventist message. Key differences in politics and religion were the reasons Germans were so receptive to Adventism while Ukrainians were not converted by the same numbers. State religion, international contact, literacy, ethnicity of Adventist missionaries, access to Bibles, and state laws all contributed to the differing responses between Germans and Ukrainians.

The role of the Orthodox Church is important in understanding religion in Russia and therefore Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church closely linked church and state until the 1917 Russian Revolution; the tsar appointed church leaders. Membership was often in name only, however, as an opportunity for citizens to show their loyalty both to the Orthodox church and the Russian government. Historian Charles Timberlake argued that Catherine the Great's invitation to settle Russia was a factor in breaking the monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church.¹ The presence of a variety of new religions, including Catholicism and Lutheranism practiced by the

¹ Charles Timberlake, and Donald W. Treadgold, *Religious and Secular Forces in Tsarist Russia Religious and Secular Forces in Late Tsarist Russia: Essays in Honor of Donald W. Treadgold* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 6.

German settlers in southern Russia, added to the religious diversity of an already ethnically diverse country.

Attitudes toward religions soured, however, after the Revolution of 1917. Acceptance of religion as vile and a "contagion" led to religious policies restricting religion.² The "Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia," was "[t]he first official act of the Soviet government touching religion."³ Passed on November 2, 1917, it placed all religious groups on an equal standing including the Orthodox Church. In 1918, a decree stated that there was to be separation of church and state, freedom of conscience especially for atheists, and the turnover of churches and other property to the government. Although the government had once vigorously supported the Russian Orthodox Church, governmental policies now called for its demise. In 1928, Stalin changed the 1918 laws and required denominations to register with the government.⁴ In addition, the revised laws called for limits on the religious instruction of children and growth of the church.⁵ These political and religious conditions in the Soviet Union explain discrepancies in Adventist growth in Ukraine. Differences between the German population living in Ukraine and the surrounding native populations led to German-Russians becoming the first Seventh-day Adventists.

The first major difference was religion. The majority of Germans living in Russia were Protestant. Many of them were Lutheran although large numbers were Catholic. There were also Mennonite settlements in Ukraine and southern Russia. Because many of these Germans were already Protestant, they were more receptive to the Adventist message. The Orthodox Church, on

² Cristel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 26. Quoted in Vladimir Lenin (1959), 89-90, 93.

³ Richard Marshall, Jr., *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union: 1917-1967* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 62.

⁴ Cristel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

the other hand, welcomed all ethnicities into the church but forbade Russians from leaving. The Orthodox Church was also steeped in traditions and being Orthodox was part of being Russian prior to the revolution.

German-Russians also initially heard about the Seventh-day Adventist Church from individuals they knew and trusted. Political unrest, famine, and loss of freedom led many German-Russians to emigrate in the late 1800s. A large group of Germans immigrated to the Midwestern United States. Once established in the United States, some of these Germans from Russia became Adventists. The first German Adventist church was organized in Milltown, South Dakota in 1881.⁶ Soon individuals who had learned of the Adventist message began writing about their newfound faith to relatives still in Ukraine. It was an Adventist tract that introduced Gerhardt Perk, the first Russian-born German Adventist, to the faith in 1882; later he would be a missionary to Ukraine and Russia.⁷

A third reason for differing receptions of the Adventist message was tied directly to literacy. The ability to read and write was crucial because the first means of spreading the Adventist message to Russia and Ukraine was through tracts and other religious papers such as *Der Adventbote* or *The Advent Messenger*. Written in German, this magazine reached a large number of the German speaking settlements in Ukraine. Even if this periodical had been translated into either Ukrainian or Russian, it still would not have been able to reach many native speakers because of their low literacy rates. Only twenty-six percent of the population was literate in 1897. In 1910, forty-three percent of the Ukrainian population was now literate, but

⁶ Mahlon Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 401-402.

⁷ Richard W. Schwarz, and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 211 and Mahlon Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 473.

they still had lower literacy rates compared to Russians, Jews, and Poles.⁸ Volodymyr Kubijovyč argues that the high illiteracy rates were a result of non-compulsory education and a poor educational system.⁹ It was not until 1925 that Adventists began to publish papers in Russian. *Golos Istjng* and *Blagowestn jik* helped reach the Russian speaking population.¹⁰ German publications such as *Der Adventbote* continued to be produced and distributed throughout Ukraine.

Not only were many Adventist publications in German, but prior exposure to the Adventist message made the Germans living in Russia much more receptive when they finally came in contact with Adventist pastors or colporteurs. However it was not only religious tracts that introduced German-Russians to tenets of the Adventist faith. William Hann, a German Mennonite, discovered the seventh day Sabbath by reading the Bible; he was already keeping the Saturday Sabbath when the first Adventist missionaries arrived. The planting of seeds through literature distribution and the careful reading of the Bible prepared the German settlements in Ukraine for the arrival of Adventist missionaries. They were much more receptive therefore than the Ukrainian population.

The first Adventist missionaries to Ukraine were in fact German or of German heritage. Shared ethnicity and language helped these missionaries explain their Seventh-day Adventist message. The first missionaries to Ukraine and Russia were Germans who had been born in Russia, but later immigrated to the United States. Desiring to spread their newfound faith, they returned to the German settlements of their childhood. Jacob Klein, originally a German Russia,

⁸ Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, "Literacy in the Ukraine SSR by Nationality and Sex, 1926 (in percentages)" http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/picturedisplay.asp?linkpath=pic%5CL%5CI%5CLiteracy_Table2.jpg (accessed Feb. 23, 2014).

⁹ Volodymyr Kubijovyč, "Literacy" In *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* vol. 3 (1993) <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/pages/L/I/Literacy.htm> (accessed Feb. 23, 2014).

¹⁰ H.J. Loeb sack, J. A. Ljwoff, and J. A. Janzen, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 103, no. 25 (June 3, 1926): 13.

left the United States to return to the Volga German settlements to preach the Adventist message.¹¹ Although Klein did not know Russian, his knowledge of German enabled him to communicate with and convert many German Russians in Russia.

There were also legal constraints that impeded proselytizing Ukrainians and Russians.¹² The punishment for this misdemeanor according to section 187 of the Russian Penal Code stated that "if any person tempts or persuades an adherent of the Russo-Greek Church to leave that church...he shall be banished to Siberia for life."¹³ Section 188 furthered explained that anyone who left the church would have his children taken from him, his property confiscated, and be forced to accept instruction by the government.¹⁴ Thus, this made it even harder to reach native Russians or Ukrainians. Gerhardt Perk and fellow missionary Louis Conradi were accused of "proselytizing among Russians."¹⁵ Therefore, there were additional advantages to seeking out non-Russian populations to teach the Bible to.

Adventist missionaries faced opposition from German settlements too, however. Some German communities that prescribed to a certain denomination, such as the Mennonite settlements, opposed "strange" Adventist teachings. However, once an Adventist congregation was established, Adventist members were usually tolerated and accepted by their communities.

There were several key individuals who served as Adventist missionaries to the Ukraine. One of the first to spread the message was Gerhard Perk. Who, after learning of Adventist doctrines from some pamphlets sent from America, wrote the publishing association for more information. As he traveled for his work with for the British and Foreign Bible Society, he

¹¹ Alf Lohne, *Adventists in Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), 63-64.

¹² Richard W. Schwarz, and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 211.

¹³ Alf Lohne, *Adventists in Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), 63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alf Lohne, *Adventists in Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1987), 57.

spread Adventist beliefs.¹⁶ Another German-Russian man named Jacob Reiswig who had settled in Milltown, South Dakota, left the United States to spread the Adventist message back in his Crimean homeland. His elderly age and poor eyesight enabled him to ask people read the Adventist tracts to him in an effort for others to hear the Adventist message without getting anyone in trouble with the authorities or the village priests.¹⁷ Returning to the United States after his first trip, he once again traveled to the Crimea in 1887 as a missionary before dying a few years later.¹⁸

The first official Seventh-day Adventist missionary to the Ukraine and Russia, however, was Louis R. Conradi. A native of Germany, he had immigrated to the United States in the mid 1800s. Although he had once desired to become a Catholic priest, he was introduced to the Adventist message by the family he boarded with in Iowa. Accepting Adventism, he then attended Battle Creek College. In 1881, he began work as a colporteur reaching out to his fellow German and Russian-German Americans. It was because of his work that the first German Seventh-day Adventist church was established in Milltown, South Dakota.¹⁹

In 1886, Conradi traveled to Europe as a missionary sponsored by the General Conference. In 1886, Gerhard Perk teamed up with him. Although both of them suffered persecution and were even imprisoned, they officially established the Seventh-day Adventist church in that region. A letter sent from Saratov on July 20, 1920 by O.E. Reinke to the General Conference described the growing Adventist work in the area. Deciding to divide the area into six unions, he explained how hard it was for even the leaders had to work at other jobs in order

¹⁶ Richard W. Schwarz, and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 211.

¹⁷ Richard W. Schwarz, and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 212.

¹⁸ Mahlon Ellsworth Olsen, *A History of the Origin and Progress of Seventh-day Adventists* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 472.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 399-402.

to support their mission work.²⁰ Conradi and the other missionaries realized the lucrative presence of the German Russians. He stated "[t]he Lord...prepared the way. Russia had opened its heart and invited the Germans to come in; and somehow they seemed to make a girdle of German colonies around Russia..." He continued: "What have they been placed there for? - In order to receive the light of the precious truth, and to carry it to the Russians; and the Government can't keep it out."²¹

After the introduction of communism and the creation of the Soviet Union, Seventh-day Adventists were unable to worship freely. If the Adventist church had not already been established, it would have been very difficult for it to take root under communism. Not only was proselytizing problematic, but communism pervaded individuals' lives even dictating how one was to raise their children. The 1918 Soviet Constitution stated that the punishment for giving one's child religious instruction was one year of forced labor.²² The church had to go underground as "[i]t became a criminal offense to bring together three young people under the age of eighteen to teach them religion."²³

During these difficult times, Adventists found ways to continue sharing and living their faith. Waldemar Jesske, a young German man living in Russia, hid portions of Scripture in the lining of his clothing. Years later in his book *Banished: A Story of Siberian Exile*, he recounted how members would hide verses in their socks or inside their shoes in order to carry them around; other ways of holding onto Scripture involved memorizing verses.²⁴ When Waldemar Jesske and his family became Adventists in 1924, his parents gave their tithe and offerings in the

²⁰ O.E. Reinke to General Conference of S.D.A. July 20, 1920. In *Minutes of Meetings of General Conference Committee Jan. 2-29, 1920*, 839.

²¹ L.R. Conradi, "The Russian Field," *The Bible Echo* 8, no. 13 (July 1, 1893): 220.

²² Waldemar Jesske, *Banished: A Story of Siberian Exile* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1967), 69.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Waldemar Jesske, *Banished: A Story of Siberian Exile* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1967), 71.

form of foodstuffs. With communal farms, produce was what they themselves were paid in and what they were then able to offer as tithe and offerings. In order to worship with fellow Seventh-day Adventists, the Jesske family would walk to Zhitomar. Without shoes, the trip would be made barefoot. Waldemar Jesske stated that "[h]undreds of people were always present, many walking more than seventy-five miles..."²⁵ Even elderly women would walk dozens of miles barefoot. Although they were able to meet, persecution was still rampant. Once while walking home, Jesske and his relatives stopped to spend the night in a barn. During the night, the owner and a group of men arrived. The Adventists barely escaped being shot.²⁶

Rudolf Zaft, another German living in the Ukraine, became an Adventist in the early 1900s with his sister. Although born into a Lutheran family, as a young man, he decided to find a church he could call his own. A missionary named Daniel Isaak, who in 1909 became the conference president of Southern Russia, converted Rudolf and his sister Martha to the Adventist faith. A chance meeting years later enabled the Zafts and Issaks to reconnect. After World War II, the Isaak family's care packages helped the Zafts survive after the war. Rudolf and Martha Zaft's new religion was very important to them. Their first hymnal remained in the family through World War I, World War II, and immigration to the United States. The Adventist church played a large role in Rudolf Zaft's life including the selection of a spouse. After becoming a lay pastor, he used his vocation as a photographer to allow him to travel to other communities including the Zaporzhe-Dnepropetrofsk area and encourage other Adventist believers at a time when the church was not officially operating. His daughter still enjoys telling the story of how one time he decided to take a box of Bibles with him on his visit. In order to smuggle them past the inspector, Zaft struck up such an interesting conversation that the inspector did not even

²⁵ Ibid, 76.

²⁶ Ibid., 77.

bother to look in the box. In 1926, H.J. Loeb sack proudly reported that "[t]he 12,282 members in Soviet Russia" composed "the largest union of republics in the world."²⁷

During the 1930s, the situation in the Ukraine became very dangerous both for German Russians and for Christians. Waldemar Koehn, whose parents and grandparents became Adventists around the turn of the nineteenth century, described Communism's rules regarding religion as "a deathblow to many Christians."²⁸ Koehn's grandfather died in a labor camp in Siberia for giving Bible studies to someone who reported him to the government. By 1941, forty-three percent of Chortitza, a German settlement along the Dnieper River, had lost their main provider.²⁹ Notwithstanding the Russians' thoroughness, there were still a number of men in Chortitza in 1941 who secretly gathered at the Zaft home for an all-night prayer vigil. These men, many of whom were Adventist, were the sons and grandsons of Germans from Russia who had converted to Adventism in the 1890s. Karl Konrad, who immigrated to the States after World War II, had a family history closely connected with the beginning of the SDA church in the Ukraine. One of his grandfathers, Wilhelm Konrad was a SDA pastor; his other grandfather, Heinrich Hann cofounded the SDA church in Chortitza, Ukraine where it met for a time in his house. Konrad's uncle, William Hann, led the Adventist congregation during the German occupation.³⁰ While the occupying German army allowed the Adventist church to meet once again, it was not the end of persecution for Seventh-day Adventist believers during World War II.

While World War II resulted in many Germans from Russia emigrating from the Soviet Union, their concern for others' salvation caused some to return after the fall of Communism.

²⁷ H.J. Lobsack, J.A. Ljwoff, J.A. Janzen. *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* 103, no. 25 (June 3, 1926): 13.

²⁸ Waldemar Koehn, *Memoirs*, 3.

²⁹ *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)" <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C4652.html> (accessed January 4, 2013).

³⁰ Karl Konrad, E-mail message to Author, Feb. 12, 2014.

Just as those who had immigrated to the States in the late 1800s returned to the Ukraine and Russia to share their new faith so did individuals such as Waldemar Koehn and his wife. Part of "Operation Bearhug," an Adventist initiative to reach Russians in the early 1990s, the Koehns' traveled to the Russian city of Togliatti. Population one million, their evangelistic series yielded 385 baptisms with an additional 100 enrolled in baptismal classes.³¹

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the Ukraine and Russia is not finished. State religion, international contact, literacy, ethnicity of Adventist missionaries, access to the Bible, and state laws enabled seed to be sown resulting in the acceptance of thousands to the Seventh-day Adventist faith in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The work is still not finished but just as evangelism was successful through the work of fellow Germans from Russia, so today Germans from Russia living in America should remember the special connection they still hold with their onetime neighbors in the Ukraine.

³¹ n.a. *NPUC Gleaner* 88, no. 22 (Dec. 13, 1993): 11.

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