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We thank Redeemer Lutheran Church - Marshalltown, IA for financial assistance and to Mrs. Linda Smith for clerical assistance in the printing of this newsletter.

## Polish Lutherans found in Eastern Siberia

by Vsevolod Lytkin  
translated by Igor Andreuk

Once, about ten years ago, in our church the phone began ringing. A Roman Catholic priest from Irkutsk was calling. He said that during his trip within the Irkutsk region he found a village where the habitants told him that they were Lutheran.

We knew nothing about these people, but responded to the invitation and arrived in Irkutsk. At that time, our Church had no parish there. Actually, the fate of the historic Lutheran parish in Irkutsk deserves a special story. But now I will say only that the parish had been established in the early 18th century. In the heart of the city a beautiful church was built in 1864. This church was destroyed by the communists in the year of 1936. (Actually, in Siberia during the 1930s, all Lutheran churches were destroyed, and all the pastors were murdered in concentration camps).

In Irkutsk, the church building was demolished and on the **Continued on page 3**



## A Bishop's travels Part 2

by Vsevolod Lytkin  
translated by Igor Andreuk

[Editor's note: Part 1 is printed in the SLMS September 2008 newsletter available for download at [www.tslms.org](http://www.tslms.org)]

From Chita, we went to Buryatia. It takes very little time, according to our Siberian standards. First we traveled for 12 hours from Chita to Ulan-Ude (the capital of Buryatia), then 6 hours more by the local train to the small town of Petropavlovka (this was the goal of our trip). Our parishioners live in different parts of Buryatia, but the church is located in Petropavlovka.

We were traveling in a third class carriage. This is a big railway car with compartments of 4 bunks for sleeping. Actually, in our country one can find railway cars of four classes. First class contains railway cars with separate compartments for two traveling passengers each (optionally with a sink in the compartment). Second class have the same-size compartment, but are equipped with four beds (or bunks) at two levels. The third class has just been described above; I would add that in the design of a third-class car many compartments without doors were provided. Third class is not the cheapest opportunity to travel: there are fourth-class cars where people simply travel on wooden benches, hundreds of them in each car, for people to sit for hours (sometimes even days!), for the entire trip. This is the most common class that people ride when traveling in such places like Buryatia.

I remember that many years ago I traveled to Buryatia in third class with Dr. Timothy Quill and Pastor Jon Vieker, big friends of our

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**Bread for Buryatians**

## **Bishop visits churches in Buryatia**

**Continued from page 1**

Church. First, we arrived by airplane from Novosibirsk to Irkutsk, and sat all night in the airport, waiting for our flight to Ulan-Ude.

Around us was a crowd of passengers sitting and waiting for another flight, to in Alma-Ata in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

They waited for the flight for a very long

time. After a long delay they went to the airplane and flew away, but several hours later they came back. Their airplane was turned back because Kazakhstan did not let the airplane enter its airspace. The airline did not have proper authorization.

The passengers were told to wait again, and they obediently prepared to sit at the airport more, maybe several days. (It was interesting that Pastor Vieker, when he returned back to his church in America, his first sermon started with the words, "We Americans are very impatient people and in Siberia I learned how to wait.") And when it finally was our time to board an aircraft, we were told that our flight was canceled. So we went to the local railway station, bought tickets and wandered for a day in the city in anticipation of the train.

When we entered the car (third class), we saw many of those who also tried to depart Ulan-Ude on the same aircraft. When they met us they were very excited, and became acquainted with the Americans (many of them never saw Americans before) and immediately invited us to drink vodka and talk. We, Russians, are very friendly people. We love visitors, and are always happy to communicate with guests.

Early in the morning, while still dark, we arrived in Ulan-Ude. I must say that the local mafia sought to control all local taxi drivers, and each of them were allowed to only bring people to specific destinations. But our driver decided to make money from us, by taking us directly from Ulan-Ude to Petropavlovka and avoiding the mafia. When the mafia people recognized it, they pursued the car, which we were in, with their car. Frankly, it was quite scary. Imagine, Buryatia, winter, dark night, cold, and bandits pursuing our taxi, where I was sitting with two Americans... But our taxi driver managed to "shake" the mafia car (like in the movies) and after four hours we arrived in Petropavlovka. Timothy Quill and Jon Vieker became the first Americans to visit the town.

I could tell many of such stories. We constantly travel and the distances in Siberia are long. For example, when I

traveled in Buryatia at a previous time, by train, again in third class, in front of me an old man sat who had an advanced condition of tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is a very common disease in Siberia. Imagine that in Novosibirsk, a relatively rich city, last year fifteen hundred people died from TB.

In Buryatia the situation is much more terrifying. It is very easy to be infected with TB, if you have a poor immune system. If you travel inside of a car or bus, and somebody coughs on you, you may become sick. The treatment is long and very expensive. The majority of people in Buryatia have no money for such treatment. So, in Buryatia, we always care for such people.

We have organized various humanitarian aid programs. The most simple was Bread Distribution. Yes, do not be surprised. Maybe it is hard for you to imagine what life in Buryatia looks like – then this illustration may help: everyone knows how people live in Africa. The photos with terrible poverty and hungry children are shared over the whole world. So in Buryatia the economic situation is about the same, but with 30 F below zero at winter time. While there is almost no snow (blowing winds are strong in the Siberian desert, and therefore there is no snow in winter), just dust and sand hitting your face and bare hands – that is awful if you have no money to buy gloves or warm clothes.

In Buryatia, we distributed food to people and brought clothes and shoes for children. Imagine that in winter in Buryatia, many children do not go to school – due to the families having many children but not enough winter boots. So they have to go to school in turns, sharing boots.

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Once we brought a container with winter shoes to be distributed, and some children came in plastic slippers to receive the shoes. Imagine, 20 F below zero, and a child is in plastic slippers. He had cloths wound around the legs, puts on his new sneakers – and goes home. We looked and wanted to weep. And the worst – the next day, we saw what we had given the children for sale at the market. Parents of these children sold the shoes. This situation has not changed.

You know, I have a very strong sense of guilt when I am visiting Buryatia. This is because I live in a big city – my house has hot water. Here most people do not have running water at all – only wells. And my children live much better than the ones in

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**The Lutheran Church in Irkutsk, built in 1864. It was later destroyed in 1930s by the Soviets.**

## Polish Lutherans survive in the Taiga

Continued from page 1

property a monument to Vladimir Lenin was constructed. But for the communists, the destruction of the churches was not enough. As usual, they tried to desecrate the former church location. There they utilized the stones from the church's altar for the construction of the basement of the monument to Lenin. The monument

Siberia.

Then this priest called the Lutheran church that was nearest to Irkutsk, which was in Novosibirsk at that time, and invited us to come and to make a trip together with him to this Polish village named Pikhtinsk.

So, we arrived in Irkutsk, met him, and began the trip to Pikhtinsk. It took us about 8 hours to get there by an old bus, and then by an old military "four wheel drive" truck, through deep forest. Eventually we came to Pikhtinsk. People met us very cordially, and we settled in a villager's house.

The next day we visited a local school (a very small wooden house containing about 10 students). Then the entire community gathered together at the home of a very old gentleman. I had a long talk with them, and then I served the Liturgy of Holy Communion for them.

We talked a lot about the history of the village and its habitants. They told me that at the very end of the 19th century, when Poland was a part of the Russian Empire, there was almost no land on which farmers could work. "In Poland we walked cows like a dog on a leash", one villager said. And then a few families gathered and moved to Siberia.

At that time, the Russian Government had provided for all those who wanted to move to Siberia, free stretches of land, and those people got the land available in the middle of the forest. Their cultivation of the land was difficult, but

they wanted and were able to work hard. They uprooted trees and created fields. They produced bread and potatoes and began to establish a community.

Other families gradually moved from Poland to Siberia, and created a village named Pikhtinsk (from the Russian word "fir tree"). People continued to come bringing ploughs,

mentioned above still stands in the center of Irkutsk.

Of course, during the time of the persecutions not only Lutherans suffered, but all the Christian Churches suffered. Just imagine that during the first four years of the communist regime in our country, 360,000 clergymen, monks and nuns were murdered. And who can count the number of laymen who were killed? Only God knows.

In the Roman Catholic Church (although not all church buildings were destroyed) all were confiscated. And all priests were murdered in the camps. One hundred years ago, many Roman Catholics lived in the Irkutsk region and some groups of them who survived during the time of persecutions still live in remote villages in the area.

Recently the Roman Catholic Church organized a special program to try to locate her parishioners. Distances are huge in Siberia, and in many places there are no means of communication. In remote areas there is no telephone exchange, and therefore, clergy must travel from village to village asking if anybody knows of Poles or Germans living in the region.

One day during such a trip, a Roman Catholic priest found out that 250 miles from Irkutsk, in the Taiga, there is a village, where some Poles live. He went there and found the village, but the villagers said that they were not Catholics, but Lutherans. Imagine this, Polish Lutherans in

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carts, weaving machines, etc. By 1912, Pikhtinsk boasted a population of about 200 people.

They became parishioners of the Lutheran parish in Irkutsk. But the condition of the local roads were bad, which prevented regular attendance at



**Lenin statue in center of Irkutsk.**

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## Lutherans in Pikhtinsk

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church. So a pastor from Irkutsk visited Pikhtinsk once a year. A pastor came, and served liturgy, baptized, conducted weddings and memorial services at the



The Pikhtinsk village

cemetery, etc. The last time the pastor from Irkutsk was able to visit Pikhtinsk was 1935. After that, there were no more services. Imagine, I was the first Lutheran pastor who had visited the village for 60 years!

In the early nineteen thirties the persecutions of Christians were gradually increasing in Russia. By the end of the thirties about half of the villagers were arrested. Some of them were shot, while others died in the camps. Those who survived, hid their faith as deep as possible, because it was dangerous to expose it. In the village, spies constantly walked by the streets and watched the windows of houses. If they noticed that inside of a house someone was praying or reading the Bible, the next day soldiers came with a truck and the believer was arrested.

We talked at length, and the villagers told me about how they lived in those times. At the village they had gone through two waves of so-called "collectivization." There were special governmental programs to confiscate property from "rich" people and to force them to join "kolkhozes" (collective farms).

For example, it was permissible for a family to have only one cow, one sheep, one horse, and so on. If you had more - it was confiscated. During the confiscations, soldiers took away everything they wanted. An elderly person told me that often soldiers took away all the clothes that they found in the house. Children played outside on the street and saw the soldier's truck going through the Taiga. At this news the children would run through the village and cry, "They come! They come!" And all the villagers would hide their belongings. As a rule, they put all the clothes that was possible on themselves, because soldiers did not typically take clothes that were being worn

at the time.

Soon the village became quite poor. The majority of men were in the work camps. The village women, children and elderly people were forced to live from hand to mouth. After Stalin's death (1953), those who survived in the camps, gradually returned back. But it was still dangerous to show your faith. Only at the beginning of the 1970s, slowly people began pray without fear. They took their Bibles, catechisms and prayer books from where they had been hidden.

Then the oldest man in the village, Rudolph Hildebrant, began to baptize children and to invite people to his house and to read a book of sermons for them. (Such books with collections of sermons, according to the Church calendar, were very popular in Russia among Lutherans who lived in remote locations, far from the churches).

On Sunday morning, villagers met in the house and read the book with sermons and prayed with the prayer-book. They showed me this book of the sermons. It was by Pastor Samuel Dombrowski, printed in the Polish language with gothic script.

The Roman Catholic priest who accompanied us (he was a Polish citizen), spoke emotionally about how difficult



Historical clothing of Pikhtinsk women

it was for him to imagine what these people had gone through. He spoke about the comparison between the fate of Poles, who one hundred years **Continued on page 6**



## Travels in Buryatia provide Church opportunity to see her future

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Buryatia. They have winter shoes. And they have a lot, as Buryat children could only dream of. Therefore, I am ashamed. I am ashamed that I live better than them.

A second feeling that I have is despair. It seems that this situation will never change. After all, we can only do so much! Distribution of humanitarian aid was perhaps the most difficult part of our work, and I am not sure that we are going about it right. At first, we did not have the experience. For example, we brought a container of clothing, and people fought with each other for the opportunity to take things first.

But it is impossible not to help these people. Preaching the Gospel must be combined with such assistance. But, of course, the most important thing – this is the Gospel. Indeed, the main aid should be to ensure that people know about Jesus Christ. Everything else is just a temporary importance.

In Petropavlovka, I served the Eucharist and communicated with our parishioners. It is a pity that I cannot do this more often. But our Church budget does not allow me to travel so far, so often. And donations in Petropavlovka are so small, so they are just enough to buy wine and candles for liturgy. The people there are very poor.

From Petropavlovka, we traveled back to Ulan-Ude in a small bus. All the passengers, except us, were Buryatians. And if you look at their faces, you may imagine that you travel somewhere in China.

It was raining, and the driver drove at a very high speed on a narrow slippery road – sometimes narrowly missing oncoming cars. And as usual, I thought that it is good that before the trip we took the Body and Blood of Christ. Because there is a real reason to say that “to travel by our Siberian roads – it is a matter of assurance in our salvation.”

It was cold outside and inside, the windows of the bus got misted over, and it was not always clear where we were going. From the driver’s cabin we could hear Madonna played loudly from the radio – so at least civilization was attempting to present itself.

Of course, the present time is hard, people are poor, and there is a financial crisis here as well, and many of our pastors are forced to combine the service in the Church with work at a secular job, as they need to buy food for their families. But we live during a time of amazing freedom in our country. And we try to preach the Gospel and find people whose ancestors were Lutherans.

We are doing everything that we can do, so that people around us know about Jesus Christ and believe in Him and can be saved. I’m glad that Christianity is growing. Our parish was the first Christian congregation in Petropavlovka. During my visit, I found, again, that our small Siberian Church has a future, because we serve people, and they believe in Christ. ✘

## A new professor at seminary

by Andrei Lipnitski  
translated by Alexei Shilin



[Editor’s note: Deacon Andrei Lipnitski graduated from Lutheran Theo. Seminary – Novosibirsk and was ordained in May 2007]

My ordination is a very important event for me, because it was a goal of my whole life, and that is why I studied at the Seminary. And, actually, I still cannot fully grasp how great this event is! It is the will of the very Christ; it is so serious that the Church entrusts this ministry to me. That is why I even ask myself sometimes, whether I deserve to be a clergyman at all.

I was born and lived in a small town in Ukraine, and then I studied in Odessa at a Music college. Later on I served in the Soviet Army in the Republic of Moldavia (now Moldova – by the way, that was where I met my wife).

I was baptized in my early childhood in the Russian Orthodox Church, like many others, only following the tradition, unfortunately. My parents were non-religious. But my more distant relatives on both my mother’s and my father’s sides were the priests! And it is very interesting. That is why, probably, it is not accidental that I have also become a clergyman.

At first, I was invited to the Lutheran congregation just to play a keyboard during the services. In the beginning I only played, and observed how everything was happening. And I treated it with a certain degree of skepticism. But later on things changed.

We did not attend the services in the Russian Orthodox Church. I do not even remember, when I was there the last time. With the Lutheran church it was different. I started to hear the Word there. And for me the words of Saint Paul from the Epistle to the Romans, when he said that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing is from the Word of God” have become a real foundation of my faith. This is how God has led me to Church, through His Word.

And then I attended the Summer theological seminars that were held in Moldova by professors of Concordia Theological Seminary (Fort Wayne, IN). It was at the end of the nineties. Dr. Horace Hummel, Dr. Timothy Quill, and Dr. Kurt Marquart were lecturing at that time. To me, even seeing a Lutheran professor was a memorable event! So these seminars had a great influence not only on me, but on many people.

I also would like to express my gratitude to the late Gennadi Artin for inviting me to those seminars. He helped to organize them, and we also spoke a lot about theology with him.

Thanks to all these people, I started thinking about my studies in the seminary in Novosibirsk. So I came to Siberia, and now things are the way they are. Today I have become a deacon”. ✘

# Pikhtinsk

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ago moved from Poland to Siberia and those who came to America.

He explained that recently he was in New York and he saw the huge churches where ethnic Poles gathered for divine services. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the economic situation in Russia and America was about the



Pikhtinsk village in winter

same. The level of religious and economic freedom was about the same. Many people migrated from Poland to both America and Russia. At that time no one could imagine the political and economic change that would occur in Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The revolution started in Russia in 1917, and the life of the Polish people who had immigrated to Russia was totally changed. In America, it was possible to believe in God, but in Russia it was only possible to be atheist. The Soviet communists began to destroy churches and to build at their places monuments to Lenin and to other revolutionaries.

In America, the freedom continued, but in Russia during 20 years of the Stalin era, about 30 million people died in the concentration camps. Thirty million of our citizens became victims of communism, and among them

there were several dozen habitants of Pikhtinsk – who were Siberian Polish Lutherans.

Before I began the liturgy, I asked an elderly woman who took a seat close to me, if she knew what the Holy

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AFTER THE SERVICE, SHE WHISPERED TO ME, ALMOST LITERALLY REPEATING THE WORDS OF SAINT SIMEON (LUKE 2:29-30):  
*"THROUGH ALL MY LIFE I DREAMED TO MEET A LUTHERAN PASTOR. NOW I CAN DEPART IN PEACE BECAUSE MY EYES HAVE SEEN THE PASTOR."*

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Communion was. It was important for me to know. She answered me that she had never communed in her life. Then she told me that her mother taught her about the Holy Communion. She then recited by heart from Luther's Small Catechism: ***"What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink, established by Christ Himself."***

After the service, she whispered to me, almost literally repeating the words of Saint Simeon (Luke 2:29-30): *"Through all my life I dreamed to meet a Lutheran pastor. Now I can depart in peace because my eyes have seen the Pastor."* ❧



Pikhtinsk children

From the Editor: The Siberian Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELC) continues to grow and be a place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the Holy Sacraments provided for sinners seeking forgiveness and healing of body and soul. In the newsletters of [THE SIBERIAN LUTHERAN MISSION SOCIETY \(SLMS\)](#) the members of the SELC reveal their faith and hopes. They are Russians seeking an answer to challenges and problems in their lives. They are a people who have been called by Christ in the healing waters of Holy Baptism and fed by the holy precious food of His body and blood. They may speak a different language but they are all baptized in the name of the same LORD and eat and drink the same Jesus. These are a people who know the mission of the Church – a mission which begins and finds its conclusion in the Word and Sacraments properly administered. We invite you to read this newsletter with a prayer of divine grace for our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Siberia. Their challenges in a land of pagan Buddhism, shamanism, and atheism is great. Your prayers and continuing support is appreciated.

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